

# THE FILM INDUSTRY

SYLVIA LAWSON

THE STORY OF THE RISE, fall and rise of Australian film has become familiar. Several generations of students know now that film-making flourished in this country well before World War I, and that the Tait Brothers' *Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906) was one of the world's first feature films. They know that Australian film achieved some splendid moments between the wars, particularly the 1920s; then, for reasons people argue about, disappeared after World War II. There were bursts of activity in the 1950s and 1960s, then what seemed like a decisive rebirth in the 1970s.

Told this way, however, the story is a kind of Loch Ness monster fable—now you see it, now you don't; and what appears and disappears is always, somehow, the same beast: 'Australian film'. The fable has been useful. During the late 1960s and early 1970s film activists produced versions of the story as part of a cultural nationalist campaign which helped persuade politicians to support the re-establishment of the industry. Some versions were in print, others in vivid compilations of film from the archives, put together to carry the message that 'we did it once, we can do it again'. The compilation films—principally Joan Long's *The pictures that moved* (1968) and *The passionate industry* (1972) from the Commonwealth Film Unit, and Anthony Buckley's *The forgotten cinema* (1967)—each did effective consciousness-raising jobs for the lobbyists. In that 'we did it once' the campaigners were not being naive; the *we* and *it* were taken up as necessary rhetorical fictions.

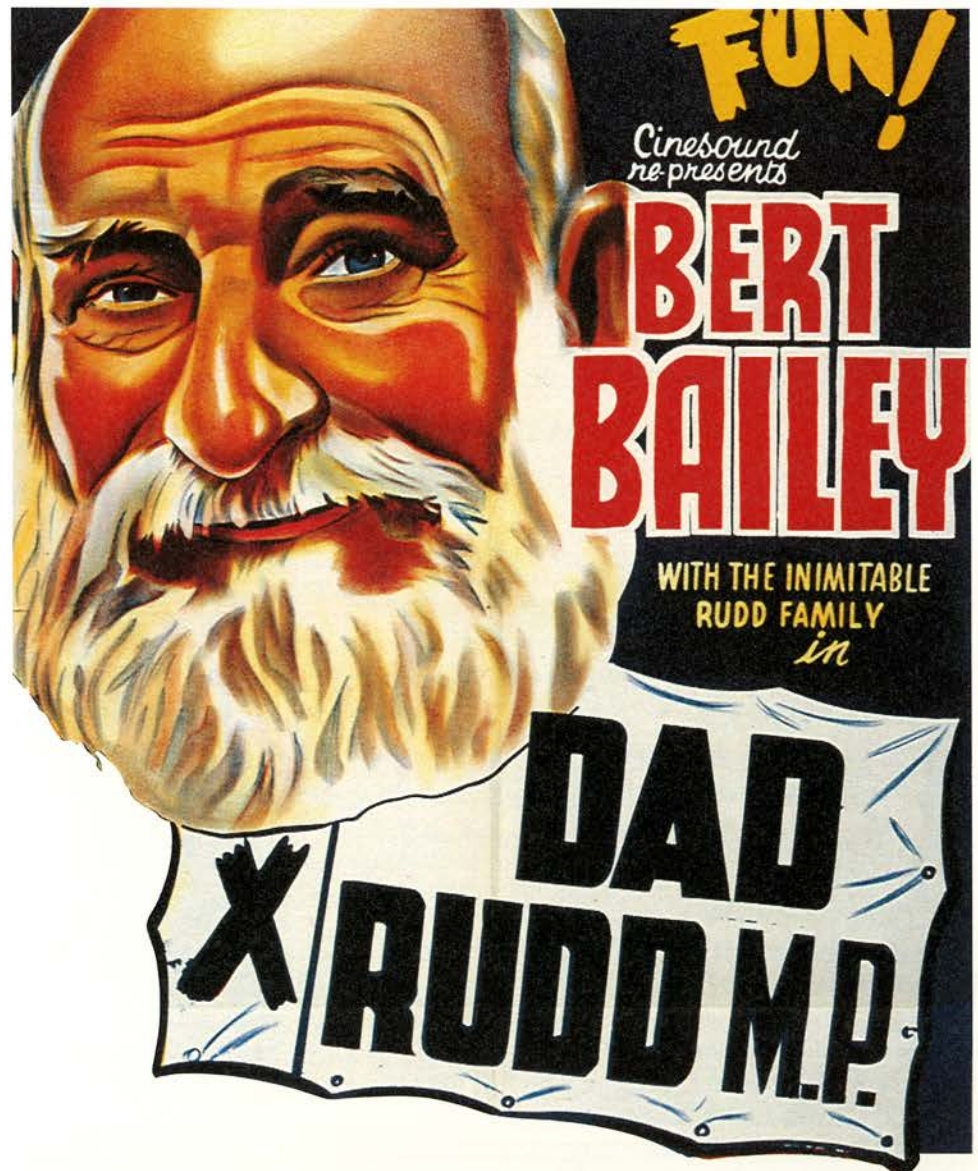
But today film history has other objects and purposes; it has become important to dismember the monster. As we look more closely at its appearances over the half-century, it becomes clear that 'Australian film' is not one beast but many; nor have they ever disappeared completely. Throughout the near-century of the cinema's life, Australians have been making films, using and enjoying them in a great variety of ways; and in those decades when there was no film industry there was much more film, and work and talk around it, than has been supposed. Finally, it now seems that the Australian feature film of the 1970s is more interesting as a



In 1948 Pix showed readers that there were still some Australians, especially older people from the country, who were coming to the cinema for the first time. Bill Smith, 'veteran of two wars', seems to have been impressed.

MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS





Publicity poster for Ken G. Hall's *Dad Rudd, M.P.*, 1940.

GREATER UNION AND THE NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE

political, cultural and economic battleground than as an array of finely wrought narratives. The adjoining territories on several sides—television series and serial, both popular and ‘quality’; video documentary drama and avant-garde *collage*; low-budget film, story, essay, document—have all produced work of arguably greater intrinsic interest. So why was the feature-film so passionately fought for, and regarded for so long as commanding the cultural high ground? What made the other forms and genres poor relations? This brief survey cannot fully answer those questions; it can, however, show some of the reasons why they must be asked.

At the outbreak of World War II, the Cinesound studio in Sydney—a subsidiary of the Greater Union exhibition circuit, with links to major distributors—closed down its feature production for reasons which were never made clear. Greater Union’s chief, Norman B. Rydge, evidently saw production as financially risky, although Ken Hall’s features had always made money. The war effort certainly required propaganda through documentaries and newsreels; but there might have been some inspiring story-telling as well. In any event, an extensive audience lost



its popular, local film fictions: movie versions of the Rudd family, the numerous sequels to *On our selection* (1932); and the honest, intrepid heroes and heroines of *Tall timbers*, *The squatter's daughter* and *Orphan of the wilderness*. Family comedy and melodrama dominated the bush, which was typically both point of origin and eventual destination: the true Australia. The city was glamour, success, complexity, corruption and allure; necessary, inescapable and false. Jingoistic nationalism (*Dad Rudd M.P.*) and family-centred moralism were worked into well-tried narrative forms, with complete obeisance to Hollywood conventions in scripting and performance. Much in those films of half a century ago might account for their popularity; but with guaranteed distribution, they were assured of a place in the film market, and therefore of an audience. Their makers knew this audience, and therefore spoke with a confidence which the later Australian feature film has never been able to recover.

After 1940 feature making continued under great difficulties. Getting production finance was hard; gaining access to the film market even harder. Thus there was no continuity of production, and each film was disadvantaged by its isolation. Charles Chauvel had been working alone since the 1920s, outside the sheltering structure of the studio. His greatest success, *Forty thousand horsemen* (1941), was one of the most likeable contributions to the long-running Anzac legend, an inspirational romped with a young Chips Rafferty playing one of three merry men, and the Cronulla sandhills playing Sinai. The New South Wales government guaranteed an overdraft, and Hoyts Theatres invested; in terms of production finance, the film prefigured the successful patterns of the 1970s. In 1944, Chauvel tried to repeat the exercise with *The rats of Tobruk*, a much more serious film which won less popularity, but which looks better in long retrospect than many others of its period, and very much better as a wartime story than the bland 1981 artwork, *Gallipoli*.

Chauvel had two films left: the pioneer family epic *Sons of Matthew* (1949) and *Jedda* (1954). Each would have been an ambitious project even within a stable and continuing industry. As things were, the stories of their making—stories of bitter struggle for both means of production and markets—are sadder and more complex than anything within the film texts themselves. All the more so because of the extravagant reach of Chauvel's narrative rhetoric; *Sons of Matthew* was a huge and curious conglomerate, with its salutations toward John Ford's great westerns and



Lobby card advertising Charles Chauvel's *Forty thousand horsemen*, 1940. NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE





Charles and Elsa Chauvel  
and crew on location for  
*Jedda* (1955). Actors  
Robert Tudawali and Ngarla  
Kunoth play the  
final moments of their  
tragic destiny.

NATIONAL FILM AND  
SOUND ARCHIVE

D.H. Lawrence's wisdom of the blood, and its will towards a white, patriarchal, epic notion of Australia. *Jedda*, a strange and isolated project of the 1950s, was even more Lawrentian, mingling a high liberal humanism with its obsessive work on woman, race and nature in a welter of visual and musical excess. It is a bizarre cultural anachronism. Both the film and the conditions under which it was produced illuminate the cultural disorientation of the Menzies years.

There had been an understanding that feature production would resume at Cinesound when the war ended, and Ken Hall, the resident director, researched studio technology overseas in that belief; but *Smithy* (1946) was his, and Cinesound's, last notable production. The little population of actors, cameramen and film technicians which made up the Sydney-based industry protested in vain. Film-making was simply not on the agenda for managers like Rydge; they were in the entertainment business but saw no percentage in taking a national entrepreneurial role. Those Australian images that appeared on the nation's screens during the next few years—in the popular *Bush Christmas* (1947), *Eureka Stockade* (1949), *Bitter Springs* (1950)—were provided by British producers, Ealing Studios and Harry Watt especially. His enduring *The overlanders* (1946) told a story based on an actual northern cattle trek of 1942. The film's fiction seems thin and stilted now, but its dominant documentary elements remain magnificently alive. If there is a national film tradition, they are part of it.

While American films like *On the beach* (1959) and *The sundowners* (1961) were made on location in Australia, local film-makers struggled hard for opportunities, and younger audiences took it for granted that the movies, by definition, came from Hollywood. Higher-brow, minority film was mostly British; sometimes, subtitled French or Italian. Other battling individuals followed Chauvel, and a few features were made by the Chips Rafferty–Lee Robinson partnership and by Cecil Holmes. Their work, like Chauvel's, faced a grudging, reluctant film market; indeed, in the case of Holmes's firmly socialist *Three in one* (1957) it was positively hostile. Film exhibition was firmly in the hands of businessmen who saw no reason to make the promotional efforts needed to launch Australian films on a public no longer accustomed to them. The Hollywood product, to which they were largely committed, came packaged, allowing them virtual entrepreneurial inertia, while





Chief cameraman, George Heath (left) and director Harry Watt (centre) of Ealing Studios, London, hard at work in 1948 on Eureka stockade. Chips Rafferty (right) played Peter Lalor, the miners' leader.

AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES

the Australian producer had not only to struggle for distribution and exhibition, but also to put money and labour into promotion. Thus the audience had little chance to make real choices; but the film trade, defending its effective killing-off of the home product, claimed frequently that 'the people' preferred what came from Hollywood. Thus in the usual version of the story, the 1950s and 1960s were for Australian film a time in the wilderness, but also a time when increasingly film-makers, journalists, the film-society and film-festival populations were bringing pressure on the decision-makers to re-establish the industry.

But lobbying would have got nowhere had it not been for the other population of professionals—perhaps 5000 people—who, by 1970, identified themselves as 'the film industry'. Their skills had been sustained by the sponsored documentaries (generally worthy, literal essays) commissioned by oil companies, and run during first halves at cinemas; by the information-film and documentary output of the Commonwealth Film Unit and ABC television; by drama produced for television by the major commercial production houses, Crawfords and Grundys; and not least, by television commercials. The redevelopment of film work in Australia would have been much more difficult without a small but significant item of legislation passed in 1959, requiring all television commercials to be locally produced. This instance of cultural and economic nationalism slipped through the net. That mitigation aside, both film and television itself in Australia suffered disastrously from R.G. Menzies' complicity with vested interests, and his disregard of the 1953 royal commission's recommendations, in turning over commercial television licences to the owners of radio and the press. As the previous chapter has shown, these moves effectively ensured that most television would be run for profit. Reliance on the American television product, dumped widely on the global market, was much less expensive than the production of local drama and documentary; and, since the controllers of the majority press were also those of television, commercial television's practices went largely unchallenged in the public arena. Menzies' decisions also closed commercial television off from any path toward diversity; for while most Australian capital cities eventually got ABC national television, the commercial channels were effectively the same one three times over.



Before the introduction of television, 'going to the pictures' was likely to be a family outing, complete with ice-creams or chocolate sold in the aisles at interval. Television increased the supply of family entertainment, enabling the cinema to be directed at specific age groups. Australian women's weekly, 28 July 1954.



Commercial television was slow to purchase films from independent producers, let alone to invest either in drama for television or film for theatrical release. Lobbying for increasing proportions of Australian content did, eventually, impress channel managements; but Menzies took the line of least resistance, both at the beginning and ten years later, when in 1964 he saw to it that the progressive Vincent Report on 'the encouragement of Australian production for television' was shelved indefinitely. In the second instance, as in the first, he met with no resistance from newspapers whose owners were deeply involved in commercial television.

Thus the histories of film and television cannot be separated. It is also clear that while the resurgence of film owes much to active lobbying through the 1960s, the industrial base was maintained through distinct but related struggles. The lobbyists—actors, producers, writers, critics and teachers—pressed hard, and 'local content' became a public issue, easily tangled (as the cause of film production had been in earlier decades) with debates about 'quality' and about moral and social effects. In consequence, a points system was introduced by the Whitlam government to encourage local production, but this was less significant in changing the industry than were the popular television series and serials which—despite government indifference on questions of 'encouragement' and protection—proliferated through the later 1960s. The pathbreaker was Crawford Productions' police series, *Homicide*, which began playing on ATN7 and HSV7 in 1964. Its makers knew the electorate, in some ways, better than Menzies did. In 1967 the ABC launched *Bellbird*, a nightly fifteen minutes of country-town soap-opera adroitly positioned just before the seven o'clock news—and without commercials.

A Sydney drive-in cinema in 1956, the year the first drive-in was opened in Australia. Thirty years later the drive-ins were struggling to survive against a technology that offered viewers even more privacy than their cars: the video-cassette recorder and player.

MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS





It ran for ten years; after five, it had an audience of nearly two million. *Bellbird* revived a tradition inherited from the radio serial; its descendant in the 1980s, JNP Productions' *A country practice*, has also won record-breaking popularity.

The police genre proved fertile; *Homicide* was followed by *Division 4*, *Matlock police* and *Cop shop*. These, with *Bellbird* and the early historical dramas, *Stormy Petrel* and *The outcasts*, all helped to make viewers familiar with Australian images and accents and to put local drama production on its feet. In later years, with the success of new kinds of realism and melodrama (Grundys' *Prisoner*, *Carson's law*, *Sons and daughters*), with widespread overseas sales for *A country practice*, *The Sullivans* and others, capitalism and cultural nationalism seemed finally to have joined hands.

In 1971, following initiatives by the Holt and Gorton governments, public investment in feature-film production began to operate through the Australian Film Development Corporation. In the following year the South Australian Film Corporation came into being under the Dunstan government; a bold initiative, in which state capitalism combined with regional cultural aspiration. Stimulated (and provoked?) by the prestige the corporation had won from its involvement in successful films such as *Sunday too far away* (1974) and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), other state governments followed suit. The New South Wales Film Corporation and the Victorian Film Corporation (later Film Victoria) began investing in the mid-1970s; the Tasmanian Film Corporation had a brief but honourable career. Western Australia and Queensland both came to the party later, their governments viewing cinematic enterprise with some suspicion. But regional patriotism supervened.

A Tariff Board inquiry into the conditions and prospects of Australian film

*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, directed by Peter Weir, made possible by money from the Australian Film Development Corporation and the South Australian Film Corporation, quickly turned out to be a commercial triumph.

NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE





production was set in train by the Gorton government. In process through the late months of 1972, immediately before the Whitlam government came to office, it attracted wide-ranging testimony from every section of the film and television industries and their audiences. The eventual report was intensely concerned to strengthen the positions of national culture and employment and to lessen economic dependence on overseas-based monopolies. The Whitlam government disregarded its major finding that Australian films, because of such monopolies, were seriously disadvantaged on the home market; and disregarded also the consequent recommendations that the major film exhibition and distribution chains should be broken up. The board's tribunal was concerned not only for mainstream, commercial feature-film production, but for Australian film work in all genres, including documentary work, short low-budget narratives and 'experimental' art-films.

*what didn't act.*

Action on these recommendations would radically have changed the Australian film landscape. Failing such action, American control of the local film market remains firmly in the place it has held, with little variation, since the end of World War I; the consequent anxiety about commercial viability may help to account for the conceptual timidity that has afflicted many Australian feature-films since the industry's revival.

The Whitlam government did, however, act on the other main recommendation in the Tariff Board report, replacing the Australian Film Development Corporation with a wider-ranging Australian Film Authority. This, from 1975, became the Australian Film Commission (AFC), charged with assistance to production, marketing, oversight of the Commonwealth Film Unit—which then became Film Australia—and also with the cultural work of the instrument which had, for some years, been a Board of the Australia Council (the Film and Television, then the Film, Radio and Television Board). This body supported non-commercial ('artistic' and/or 'experimental') film work with small grants, and also funded film publications and non-commercial exhibition. One long-term result of these political and bureaucratic developments is that the Australian Film Commission sustains much of the interesting 'independent' film work discussed below through small grants of money for production; the anomaly is that it does little to ensure the general circulation of such work. In other words, many films produced in Australia with government assistance are not assisted at all in finding local audiences. Another consequence is that the large, complex structure of interrelated state and federal film bureaucracies (by now strongly institutionalised) has inevitable effects on the films themselves. Whenever those films are analysed and evaluated, their bureaucratic contexts should be taken into account.

Contrasting notions about the long-cavassed industry were developing among different groups of lobbyists through the early 1970s. Some insistently used the term 'cinema' to mean film as a body of artworks, of which the directors were the principal authors, with writers and producers making less significant contributions to the total results. Others, including television-drama producers, wanted a strongly commercial industry, supplying films of the broadest popular appeal. The early output of the film investment bodies reflected the latter philosophy more strongly. *The adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1971) and *Alvin Purple* (1973), two unabashedly ocker comedies, were among the first films to benefit from public investment; and so was *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), the decisive entry of the feature-film into the Australian high-culture canon.

In the years that followed there was a certain triumph for the advocates of 'quality' and 'cinema'; investment in annual expeditions to the Cannes festival, the great film marketplace, paid off, and numerous features were acclaimed inter-



My brilliant career (1979) enjoyed a success that benefited the careers of Gillian Armstrong, the director, and Judy Davis, who played the central character.

NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE



nationally. There developed a prestige list of films that were held to register cultural maturity on the part of postcolonial Australia, and by that token to communicate, nurture and enhance 'national identity'. Its principal members were *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (director, Peter Weir); *Sunday too far away* (1975, Ken Hannam); *Caddie* (1976, written by Joan Long, directed by Don Crombie); *The getting of wisdom* (1977, Bruce Beresford); *The Devil's playground* (1976) and *The chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), both directed by Fred Schepisi; *Newsfront* (1978, Phil Noyce); *My brilliant career* (1979, Gillian Armstrong); *Gallipoli* (1981, Weir); *Careful, he might hear you* (1984, Carl Schultz); *For love alone* (1985–86, Stephen Wallace). The South Australian Film Corporation's highly successful *Storm boy* (1976, Henri Safran), though made mainly as a children's film, belongs there also. Nearly all the films named are essentially concerned with growing up, throwing off repressive authority; it is as though the adolescent central figures were surrogates for an idea of colonial and postcolonial Australia. In *Caddie*, battling on is more important than growing up; but only *Newsfront*, of all the prestige list, combines the theme with a grip on history rather than nostalgia. All reflect an anxiety to make film a tasteful national export, acceptable also to the powerful audiences who principally support national ballet and opera; all, with their scrupulous costuming and design, purvey an unexceptionable liberalism. Within its framework, the Aborigine is generally represented as a repository of more or less mystical wisdom, a potential teacher of white Australians if only they are open and sensitive enough. In *Storm boy* the child's innocent isolation matches the black man's disinherited position; they meet each other's needs, but the Aborigine is set outside society and history, as the white boy is not. This liberal racism has operated through numerous other mainstream features, most blatantly Weir's *The last wave* (1977) and Tim Burstall's *Eliza Fraser* (1976). For more complex and valid representations of the Aborigine on film audiences must turn, if they can, to films outside the mainstream.

The high visibility of the prestige list has obscured the potential interest of hundreds of other features produced during the period. The ocker-comedy line was extended, with sequels to Barry's and Alvin's adventures. The genre pleased audiences, and displeased reviewers intent on sensitivity. Some critics, in retrospect, have found evidence of neglected vitality in the group; they claim that Barry and Alvin, with their cousins *Stork* and *Petersen* (both made by Tim Burstall), had real value in projecting the sexual anxieties of the Australian male and therefore should not have been dismissed. By contrast, the less successful reachings after film artistry (Ken Hannam's *Break of day* and Weir's *The last wave*) already look thin and overstrained.

In response to active lobbying from makers of both features and documentaries, the Fraser government in 1980 set up a system of tax concessions whereby film investment became subject to generous, though variable, rates of deductibility. This opened the way for an industry based more strongly on private capital than on support from public funding. Some critics believed that this shift in the economic base would mean the end of those cherished and closely related objectives, film work based on care for 'quality' and the advancement of national culture. Neither of those objectives had anything to do with the success of George Miller's *The man from Snowy River* (1983), which packed in audiences across the country; a big-scale movie registering the Australian landscape not lyrically or mystically, but rather as inhabitable and controllable property. *Phar Lap* (1984) found similar success; while *Coolangatta Gold* deservedly failed. The Kennedy–Miller group's extraordinary *Mad Max* series, profitably investing in the postholocaust imagery validated by the real terrors of nuclear-age youth and popularised by the rock-clip, took off across the world, drawing the same audiences as its American kin, *Star wars* and *E.T.*



John Miller in a scene from *Wrong side of the road*, directed by Ned Lander and Graeme Isaac, about the lives of the South Australian Aboriginal rock bands 'Us Mob' and 'No Fixed Address'. Winner of the Australian Film Institute jury prize, 1981. Photograph by Carol Ruff.



Art-film aspirations persisted, mainly as illustrations of widely read Australian novels and short stories: *Monkey grip* (1982), *Bliss*, *The empty beach*, *The Coca-Cola kid* (all 1985), *For love alone* (1985–86). Students of all ages consumed and discussed these almost as eagerly as they did the films of Fassbinder, Wenders and Godard. But it was always safe to bet that the tales would last longer in print than in their celluloid postscripts, while the most durable film fictions of the crowded decade-and-a-half would be those written for film, mostly realised in low-budget, small-scale, fringe-circulation productions. These included Michael Thornhill–Frank Moorhouse’s *Between wars* (1974), with its pessimistic grip on history and politics, Stephen Wallace’s austere essay on a prison riot, *Stir* (1981), and his searching *Love letters from Teralba Road* (1977), Bert Deling’s fierce little drama of the drug-and-rock scene, *Pure shit* (1977) and Hayden Keenan’s uproarious exploration of punk, *Going down* (1982). Phil Noyce’s tough little melodrama *Backroads* (1977), made with the Aboriginal activist Gary Foley, and the high-energy *Wrong side of the road* (made in 1981 largely by its cast, with help from Graeme Isaac and Ned Lander), were the first entertainments to project Aborigines as real agents within society and history. All these films would last. Small audiences would find them on late-night television, in fringe and campus cinemas, by retrieval from film exchanges, and from the National Film and Sound Archive which, by 1984, had finally achieved some of the status and resources for which its supporters had campaigned over decades.

Those films, and many smaller ones like them, produced by students and small-time producers working on minuscule budgets, offer images of Australia not found in the big-budget features or on television. They achieve some cultural precision, as larger-scale productions mostly do not or can not; they are more complex, tougher-minded, and often more hopeful. Presented with greater formal inventiveness and challenge, they are linked together especially by greater trust in the audience, a belief that people are capable of more active responses than the film industry’s money-men are generally willing to bank on.

With its visible fluctuations, the industry continued to be an object of obsessive public anxiety; and the space in which it could work for audiences was shrinking, squeezed somewhere between the television mini-series and the home video party, with the always dominant American blockbusters claiming the time and dollars of those—mostly the young and affluent—who wanted to go out.

Thus by the mid-1980s the Australian feature-film, the old Loch Ness monster, was visible but uneasy on the surface. Too many films were funded, produced and then lost to sight: the outstanding cases of 1986–87 were Bruce Beresford’s *The fringe dwellers*, from Nene Gare’s novel, and the splendid, low-key realist drama by West Australian Glenda Hambly, *Fran*, with Noni Hazlehurst and Annie Byron projecting female images of rare and satisfying complexity. The film-funding bureaucracies continued to evade the central problems of distribution and exhibition in a market still controlled from Los Angeles and New York.

Then, suddenly, the monster made a splash—as *Crocodile Dundee*. This seemingly simple little entertainment, featuring Paul Hogan in a role not far removed from his habitual TV ad persona, broke attendance records across the world; in the story, and in box-office actuality, an innocent Aussie battler took on New York and won. Cultural analysts everywhere dissected the phenomenon, some deploring the allegedly old-fashioned playing-out of race and gender roles, others finding promise in the way an unsophisticated popular hero took Aboriginality on board, and displaced the endemic gentility of earlier export images. One thing was clear: Hogan had inherited that duty which Chips Rafferty had borne nobly for so long—playing the typical (male) Australian to the world.



Through a very long meanwhile, non-fiction film had flourished under more than one aegis. From 1941 Cinesound's main strength had been wartime documentary, a genre lifted to a particularly expressive level by the New Guinea work of Damien Parer, whose *Kokoda front line* won an Academy Award as the best documentary of 1942. Both documentary and newsreel were consumed enthusiastically through those years on the home front, where, although the feature-film-makers had lost their battle, the movie business was booming. The local film public was still assumed to be a homogeneous population, easily entertained in one decade by mimics of Hollywood with local trimmings, and now (so the suppliers thought) as easily persuaded by vigorous propaganda from Parer and Frank Hurley.

In 1940 John Grierson, widely recognised as the father of documentary, had visited Australia to discuss with the wartime government the establishment of a national documentary unit. In common with the early makers of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Grierson believed strongly in the goal of enlightened citizenship—an informed democracy, as the phrase often went; so he perceived a teacherly seriousness as the appropriate mode for the public communicator, and the documentary as a prime instrument of enlightenment. He spread that gospel so effectively from Britain to Canada and Australia that his long shadow can still be seen across the official education- and information-film work of all those countries. The wartime Department of Information Film Division was attached

*The publicity poster for the film Crocodile Dundee, starring television personality Paul Hogan. The film became a block-buster success.*

RIMFIRE PRODUCTIONS





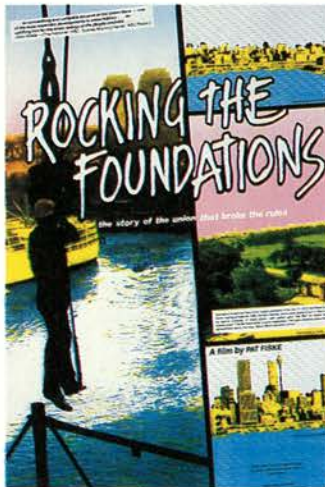
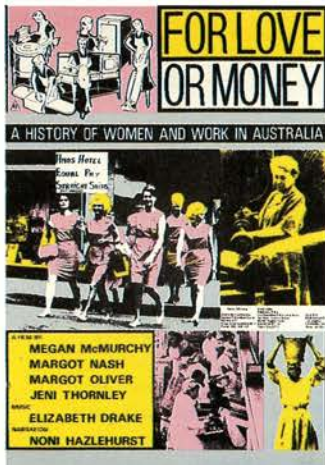
after 1945 to the Department of the Interior; in 1962, with new, modern studios at Lindfield, north of Sydney, it became the Commonwealth Film Unit; another thirteen years and some bureaucratic transformations later, it was Film Australia, a not-quite-autonomous branch of the Australian Film Commission.

The unit's principal task for much of its first 30 years was to make educational films for schools and departmental training programs for Australian consulates and embassies. The documentary life of Australia's 1950s was largely elsewhere; for example, in the high visual and verbal rhetoric of John Heyer's magnificent *The back of beyond*, made for the Shell Film Unit in 1954; and—on a different register—the impassioned socialist political work of the Waterside Workers' Film Unit between 1953 and 1958. Its members, drawn from the small but vigorous left culture around Sydney's New Theatre, had assisted Joris Ivens in making *Indonesia calling* (1946), the virtually clandestine documentary on the Australian dock-workers' support for Indonesian independence. Using that experience, and deliberately taking lessons from Eisenstein's and other early Soviet film-makers' approaches to film structure, they produced vigorous polemics for social justice in Menzies' Australia: *Pensions for veterans*, *Hewers of coal*, *The hungry miles*. In their own day they found only tiny audiences; today many film-makers and students find in them material for a local tradition worth retrieving and using.

Through the more hopeful early 1970s, Film Australia grew mildly adventurous, developing sidelines in drama for both children and adults, and extending its documentary scope. Gradually the sternly literal educational mode relaxed. Results included a remarkable essay on a country town, *Belonging*, and the feminist exploration *All in the same boat*. A retreat into conventional caution marked the later 1970s, perhaps reflecting general conditions; then by the mid-1980s, there was some renewal of courage, and a determination that the government's film-makers would open their work more decisively to social change. Despite well-known difficulties, a similar hopefulness was apparent in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's documentary work. Meanwhile, as ever, independents outside the larger institutions produced the genuinely pathfinding films, which, for example, asserted Papua New Guinea's place on the Australian agenda, as in *Angels of war* (1981, Andrew Pike, with Gavan Daws and Hank Nelson) and Robin Anderson's and Bob Connolly's history-essay *First contact* (1982). Feminist film-makers and scholars (Megan McMurchy, Jeni Thornley, Margot Oliver and Margot Nash) completed their lively extended history of women and work in Australia, *For love or money*, in 1983. This was followed by further essays in similar territory, like Sharon Connolly's and Trevor Graham's *Red Matildas*. These films, building on the enterprise of feminist film-makers in Australia and across the world since 1970, grappled more vigorously with the problems of historical investigation than many academic historians were prone to recognise. Vitality was sustained also in Pat Fiske's uncompromising film work on struggles around housing and slum clearance: *Woolloomooloo* (1978) and *Rocking the foundations* (1985), on the builders' labourers' green bans of the early seventies, a splendidly invigorating work whose battle towards production and circulation matched the struggles it depicted.

In wholly different modes, other film-makers registered the ways in which the politics of the 1980s had penetrated intellectual debate, breaking down the categorical boundaries around 'feminism', 'race', 'entertainment' and 'art'. Helen Grace's half-hour essay, *Serious undertakings* (1982) achieved wide circulation around campuses, fringe cinemas, festivals—winning numerous awards—and found small but influential audiences in Britain and Europe. Segmented like the television news, invoking feminism, motherhood, film theory, the problems of a national cultural history, canonical literature and painting, it demonstrated visibly

Publicity poster by Jan Mackay.



Redback Graphix' poster for Pat Fiske's *Rocking the foundations*. In 1986 the State Film Centre in Melbourne postponed screening this film because of the controversial nature of its subject, the Builders' Labourers' Federation. REDBACK GRAPHIX



that feminist politics were tangled with those of nationality and the media at every point, while also proposing that feminism can change the ways in which 'history' and nationality are conceived. *Serious undertakings*, with its intellectual changes and shocks, offers pleasure and argument in a brilliantly welded amalgam.

It is also a surfacing of an old and long-underestimated tradition, that of Australian avant-garde film work. Ubu Films in Sydney had begun operations in the early 1960s, and the group around it was closely linked to the inception of the intrepid, longrunning Sydney Filmmakers' Co-operative. Their visual essays made on 16mm film had aesthetic links both to the international avant-garde, active and inventive since the 1920s, and to other workers in Australia such as Paul Winkler and Arthur and Corinne Cantrill. By 1980, however, the old formalist avant-garde was merging with a more political one, working on super-8mm film and, increasingly, on video. In small festivals and on weekend programs across the country, the work and play continued, with input from training and experience in photography, painting, architecture and theatre.

White men had been pointing cameras at black ones in Australia for nearly a century; through the 1970s, black Australians sought greater control over the ways in which they were represented to the world on film, as in other areas. In a wide array of splendid documentary work on the land rights struggle and the Aborigines' general living conditions, outstanding products owed much of their strength to collaboration between white film-makers and black. Some of this work came out of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which had initially used film and film-makers with a comparatively narrow brief, to record what were thought to be disappearing rituals, in an eleventh-hour task of retrieval. As the Aborigines' own political and cultural recoveries came to recognition, the institute's film-makers redefined their duty, and through the later 1970s produced some of the most openly inventive and exploratory documentary work of the period. Among many others, *Takeover* (1982) produced by Judith and David Macdougall, came to grips with the three-way struggle of north Queensland Aborigines with and against federal and state governments; Curtis Levy's magnificent *Sons of Namatjira* (1976) explored the paradoxes of certain central Australian Aborigines' relations with white tourists and art dealers. A crowning achievement for the institute was the Macdougalls' feature-length documentary narrative of 1986, *Sunny and the Dark Horse*; in this extraordinary feat of unrehearsed, real-life storytelling, a major Aboriginal character lives, works and plays, mastering his circumstances as neither victim nor saint.

Outside the institute, with many Aboriginal collaborators, Allesandro Cavadini and Carolyn Strachan made *Protected* (1976) on Palm Island, and later *Two laws* (1981), exploring the Borroloola community's past and present in the Northern Territory. Some white film-makers continued to exploit Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal problems for exotica and mysticism, but they faced greater resistance; and Aborigines found ways of using exploitative films for their own purposes. In the cities, and more markedly across central and northern Australia, Aboriginal groups began working resourcefully and inexpensively with video cassettes, filming journeys, struggles, rituals, stories. They were getting ready for satellites, and a future in which at least some of the Australian images would be their own.



*A filmmaker at work. Pat Fiske recording sound in the Hunter Valley, NSW, for the documentary Coal is our life. Photograph by Carol Ruff.*





*Kenneth MacQueen (1897–1960), Sinking the tank, 1945. Watercolour. MacQueen's vision of the revival of rural Australia, noble ploughman is assisted by a bulldozer.*

NEW ENGLAND REGIONAL ART MUSEUM



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MAKING A LIVING





*In Wasteland II, painted in 1945, Jeffrey Smart captures decay and degeneration in an environment where human enterprise had once prospered. The drab, hostile ambience of the work, and the sense of challenge, matches the mood of a nation facing the need for postwar reconstruction.*

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES