Picturing Queensland: The Local, the National and the Global in Early Queensland Film

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The current negotiations and debates around a US/Australia free trade agreement have highlighted issues concerning threats to the place of national cultures in what is perceived as an increasingly internationalised system dominated by a narrow set of Hollywood values. In this context it may be timely and perhaps instructive to consider the interplay of local, national and global factors in an earlier “take-up” phase of the novelty which cinema presented in the early decades of the last century.

One of the motors that has driven the revival of early cinema scholarship since the 1978 Brighton FIAF Conference (Cinema 1900-1906) is a theoretically informed empiricism which recognises patterns of global developments while appreciating that they are often nuanced by local, regional and national factors.

It was in this spirit that in the mid 1990s Chris Long and I undertook an Australian Research Council supported project canvassing the place of factual film in the early years of Australian cinema with a particular emphasis on their production and exploitation in Queensland. While fictional narrative remains the primary interest for most scholars there is now a wide recognition of the importance of factual, actuality and topical production for both the economic and aesthetic development of the cinema. Our project broadly employed the method proposed in Allen and Gomery’s Film History: Theory and Practice (1985) and approached cinema as, simultaneously, a technology, an industry, a system of representation and an art form. A superficially paradoxical outcome of this local film research was the reinforcement of the understanding of the inescapable internationalism of early cinema.

A focus of our research project was the Wills/Mobsby collection of actuality films made in 1899 by Fred C Wills (the Queensland government artist and photographer employed at the Department of Agriculture) and his assistant Harry Mobsby. Between March and October 1899, Wills and Mobsby produced about 30 one-minute films illustrating agricultural processes and some public events. Arguably, these represent the world’s earliest “in-house” production by a government department, and happily, the bulk of these films survive.

Today I want to reflect loosely on the range of relations which link the local and the international in the Picturing of Queensland from the introduction of exhibition and production in the 1890s until the introduction of local sound production in the early 1930s
The Sestier Myth and Fred C Wills: the Local and the Global

I’m no longer sure exactly when it was that I first became aware of the existence of the Lumiere footage of Colonial Queensland held by the National Film and Sound Archive. I know that it was on the agenda but largely unseen by 1989 when Sue Ward — another contributor here today — and I were struggling to produce a chapter surveying independent filmmaking in Queensland for what would become the collection *Queensland Images* co-edited by Jonathan Dawson and Bruce Molloy and published in 1990.

At that time the NFSA card catalogue carried tantalising references to what were called the “Queensland Lumiere Films”. However, apart from some stills and a crude video transfer of part of the footage, the films themselves were unavailable for scrutiny. They had been sent to France for preservation printing and video mastering from the round sprocketed 35mm Lumiere stock which survived.

Press coverage in 1982 of the Last Film Search (sponsored by Kodak and the Utah Foundation amongst others) indicated that the National Film Archive at the National Library was anxious to determine the film’s provenance since “nothing is known of the cameraman or men who took the moving pictures. Nor is it known when or how the films were acquired by the Queensland Museum” where they had at long last been unearthed.

The first explanatory impulse was to group these productions with the known output of the Lumiere operative, Marius Sestier. Sestier has been widely credited with initiating film production in Australia. Famously, with his footage of the 1896 Melbourne Cup.

However, some patient archival digging — not amongst film prints but in State Government archives, press holdings and photographic industry journals — ultimately revealed a more complex and instructive narrative of their production.

In short, the films were revealed to be connected to Lumiere only via the use of that company’s Cinematographe and film stock. In fact they had been produced in Queensland by a Colonial Government employee, Fred Wills, and his assistant, Henry Mobsby.

Frederick Charles Wills (187?-1955), an English-born artist and photographer, was appointed to the Queensland Department of Agriculture as its first Official Artist and Photographer on March 13, 1897. (Wills resigned this post in 1903 to pursue a career as a commercial photographer but during his tenure with the Department he was the driving force behind the world's earliest "in-house" government film production.)

Henry William Mobsby (1860 -1933) —Wills' assistant and eventual successor — was the Queensland Government Official Artist and Photographer at the Department of Agriculture from 1904 until his retirement in 1930.

Wills' appointment coincided both with the Department of Agriculture becoming an
independent portfolio and with the launch of the *Queensland Agricultural Journal*. Wills' duties initially involved illustrating plant life and farming scenes for the *Journal* and botanical specimens for the Botanical Gardens. He also produced photographic enlargements and lantern slides to advertise Queensland's primary industries and resources.

The prospect of the Greater Britain Exposition in 1899 induced the Queensland Government to consider favourably Wills' proposal to supplement its displays with motion pictures, "lantern slides prepared on the Lumiere Cinematographe principle".\(^1\) Unsurprisingly, the preparation of this material fell to Wills who was young and enthusiastic, actively involved with the Queensland Amateur Photographic Society, and a frequent contributor to Australia's photographic magazines.

Queensland's Chief Secretary's Department agreed to finance the motion picture venture for a year from October 1898. In December 1898 Wills was sent to Sydney to obtain a Lumiere Cinematographe and the expertise to operate it. The photographic suppliers, Baker and Rouse, imported the equipment and Wills made five successful trial films in Sydney.

On Wills' return to Brisbane in March 1899 Henry Mobsby was appointed as his assistant. By October 1899 Wills and Mobsby had produced some 30 one-minute films during various "still" photography excursions around Queensland. While many of these films illustrated agricultural processes, they also covered topical events.

Among the earliest of these is the arrival of Queensland's Colonial Governor, Lord Lamington, at the opening of parliament on 18 May 1899. The next evening, Wills, exhibited "some very good specimens of locally taken cinematograph pictures" at the Queensland Amateur Photographic Society.\(^2\) The films probably included the surviving views of Brisbane's Roma Street Railway Station, Queen Street and the Victoria Bridge.

Most of the Wills/Mobsby films were taken in the spring of 1899 and illustrate wheat harvesting on the Darling downs, sugar harvesting at Nambour and aspects of stock management. These are the earliest Australian industrial documentary films and are among the world's earliest films of the type. Many of the 60- second rolls are constructed in sequences of two and three camera set-ups. "When a subject takes more than one film," Wills casually observed in 1900,"they are joined with the aid of amyl acetate with some of the celluloid dissolved in it".\(^3\) Wills made the earliest surviving Australian films exhibiting sequential editing techniques.

These films exhibit an artist's care in composition. "There is artistic taste needed in the choice and management of subject as much, and perhaps more, than in ordinary

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\(^1\) Chief Secretary's Under Secretary to Department of Agriculture Under Secretary, 24 October 1898: Premier's Department Letterbook, PRE/G2,p392, QSA
\(^2\) *Australian Photographic Journal*, 20 June 1899, p.141; *Brisbane Courier* 22 May 1899, p.4.
\(^3\) *Australian Photographic Journal*, 20 November 1900 p.244.
photography”.4 But Wills was at pains to point out that a cinematographer was "by no means a wizard, but, to use a familiar expression ‘a real hard grafter’”.5 He claimed that "out of thirty negative and thirty positive films which I have exposed only two negatives and one positive have been spoilt. It behoves one to be careful when each film costs 22/6d".6

The series is also important for images such as those of "Kanaka" labourers at work in the cane fields in conditions resembling slavery. The use of this labour — which was actively promoted by the Agriculture Department — ceased with the coming of Federation.

Wills and Mobsby contrived to 'keep the customer satisfied' by filming their employers, the Queensland Cabinet, boarding the government paddle steamer, *Lucinda*, for a Ministerial banquet.

Their last and most impressive films—the only known surviving footage of Australian Boer war departures— recorded Queensland troops bound for South Africa. Filmed in Brisbane between 28 and 31 October, this marked the end of the film experiment. The Chief Secretary's 12 months of funding had elapsed.

Unfortunately, the films only recorded complete showing was a private one in the Agricultural Department Boardroom on 17 November 1899. By the time they reached Britain in 1900 — too late for the Exposition—the Lumiere 35mm stock with its round sprocket holes had fallen victim to technological change and the Wills/Mobsby films would not fit newer projectors. The films also met resistance from George Randall, Queensland's immigration lecturer, who avoided using a Lumiere projector even after one was provided. Randall had not been consulted and considered that these motion picture novelties would attract "the flotsam and jetsam of the cities" rather than "the good men from the villages".7

Though Wills gave a 'Paper on Cinematography' to the Queensland Amateur Photographic Society on June 15 1900, he was never to resume film production. In 1903, after continued disputes over limits to the quality and amount of pictorial content in the *Queensland Agricultural Journal*, Wills resigned his government post.

Henry Mobsby remained with the Department of Agriculture until his retirement in 1930. He succeeded Wills as the Government Artist and Photographer but had scant direct involvement in subsequent Queensland Government film production, preferring to commission others such as the ex-Salvation Army Limelight cameraman, Sid Cook, or Al Burne of Kinetone Films to undertake the "hands-on" filmmaking.

Mobsby's contemporary reputation stemmed from his scenic photography and exhibition

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4 Ibid p.243
5 Ibid 20 September 1900, p.200.
6 Ibid 20 November 1900, p.244.
7 Brisbane Sun 9 August 1908 "Attracting Immigrants" (clipping in Randall papers, Fryer Library, University of Queensland)
design. A Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society of Artists, Mobsby regularly designed and organised Queensland's exhibits for the annual shows in Southern capitals and at the Royal National Exhibition in Brisbane. His photography gained international distinction, and he officially represented Queensland at the Franco-British Exhibition (London) in 1908, the Panama-Pacific Exhibition (San Francisco) in 1915, the British Empire Exhibition (Wembley) in 1924, and the South Pacific Exhibition (Dunedin) in 1925/26.

**Significance and Implications**

Much could be teased out from this example but today what I want to emphasise is the complex interplay of local, national and global factors at work. These resist any single formulation of causality and determination which might position, say, the global as pre-eminent. Rather, what is revealed here is an interdependency of local, national, global, technical, commercial, aesthetic and governmental impulses.

I now want to note briefly other instances of such interplay in the period until the coming of sound production to Queensland. I believe that in their various ways these experiences caution us from any overly simple account of determinants influencing the work of Picturing Queensland.

**First Motion Picture Exhibition and Film Projection in Queensland**

The first film exhibition in Queensland was on August 13 1895 at the Brisbane Show and came courtesy of Edison’s Kinetoscope, a peepshow viewer not a projector. People paid a shilling, the equivalent in value to about twelve dollars today, to see five half-minute films.

In August 1894 the theatrical entrepreneur JC Williamson — who earlier had toured Edison’s phonograph — secured the exhibition rights to this 35mm viewer and a national tour, managed by the Macmahon brothers, commenced form Sydney on 30 November of that year.

In Brisbane such was the public response that the kinetoscopes had to be moved from the showground to more central premises in Queen Street. 400 people saw the movies in their first day's show there - the 17th of August, 1895.

There were 12 films in total, all featuring the circus and vaudeville stars who had made the journey to New Jersey to be captured by Edison’s immobile in his Black Maria studio.

Initially, Edison had not been interested in projection. He thought more money could be made showing films to one person at a time with the kinetoscope. But developments in France where the Lumiere brothers- proprietors of Europe’s largest photographic works—had achieved an elegant solution to the problems of projection and had the capital and contacts to dominate the market brought a change. Grudgingly recognising the popularity
of projection Edison developed the Vitascope. The Macmahon brothers again secured touring rights in Australia.

By September 1896 the Lumiere operative, Marius Sestier, had reached Australia and commenced exhibition and production. The Macmahons knew that the Vitascope, a comparatively crude projector, was no match for the newly arrived Lumiere Cinematographe and in order to avoid the competition in Sydney the electrically operated Vitascope was immediately taken north to Brisbane, where it opened for business on 26th September 1896.

While films had previously been shown as short items on live theatre programs, the Macmahons' Vitascope venue in Brisbane was the first to be exclusively devoted to film projection (albeit that all the films had previously been exhibited in kinetoscope viewers). Their Brisbane screenings beat the opening of Sydney's "Salon Lumiere" projection venue by two days. So if a place exclusively devoted to film projection is your definition of a cinema - a shop in a Brisbane arcade was Australia’s first cinema.

**First Production in Queensland: Alfred Cort Haddon and Ethnographic Film**

Queensland's oldest confirmable film was made on Murray Island in the far North-East corner of Torres Strait, at the Northern tip of the Great Barrier Reef. In 1898 the 43 year old Professor Alfred Haddon led a Cambridge University field expedition to study the culture of the Torres Strait Islanders.

Though film in this early period was still considered by many to be an ephemeral technical novelty, one of the major impulses underpinning the development of motion picture technology had been the desire of scientists to document motion and behaviour. The Cambridge expedition was equipped with the latest scientific recording instruments including wax cylinder phonographs and a kit for taking stills, motion pictures and even experimental colour photographs. Haddon had a 35mm Newman and Guardia movie outfit and thirty 75 ft rolls of raw film to record Islander dances, ceremonies and customs.

Despite film jamming in the tropical climate, Haddon and his colleague, Anthony Wilkin, managed to record five films on Murray Island in the first week of September 1898. Four minutes of footage survive from this, the world's first ethnographic film production in the field. Almost a century later those documentary images would take on renewed significance when they played a part in the High Court's historic Mabo decision.

The Haddon expedition’s footage of the Malu ceremony, shot on Murray Island on the 5th September, 1898, is Queensland's oldest surviving film.

**Salvation Army Limelight Department Production in Queensland**

The Salvation Army's Limelight Department under Major Joseph Perry was Australia's
outstanding pioneer cinema producer. Far from being only a religious film producer, it was also a commercial venture raising funds for the Army's social and religious work. At first, film was seen merely as an extension of Perry’s lantern-slide presentations and was used in tandem with varying combinations of live music, slides, gramophone records and lectures, but there was a steady increase in the scale of motion picture production.

By June 1899 Salvation Army film production extended to Queensland, initially covering the work of their Riverview Boys Home at Moggill, west of Brisbane. Riverview was the base for over 30 boys from broken homes and the boys were filmed training for farm work, land clearing, and diving off a log into the Brisbane River. This evidence of lives reclaimed through practical Christianity was included with social work illustrations from the rest of Australasia and shown in the lecture "Social Salvation", with 270 slides and 25 one-minute films — a two and a half hour presentation occupying a whole night's program. At the time, the most ambitious show of its type in the world.

The Limelight Department soon formed Australia's first registered film production company — the Australian Kinematographic Company — as a vehicle for producing commissioned work for external agencies. Joseph Perry was its chief cameraman and director and the Queenslander, Sidney Cook, was the second camera operator.

The Royal Visit to Australasia in mid-1901 included some of Sidney Cook's first camerawork, his coverage of the Duke of York—later King George the Fifth—laying the foundation stone of the Boer War monument in Ballarat on the 13th of May 1901. Sid Cook also shot the Royal Couple's departure for Brisbane. They had been scheduled to go by sea, but an outbreak of bubonic plague in the Port of Brisbane changed their plans.

Queensland featured in another ‘lost’ film of the Royal tour shot by the British navy's Chief Petty Officer MacGregor who accompanied the Royal Couple on the Royal vessel, the "Ophir".

In 1902 the new Australasian Commissioner of the Salvation Army, Thomas McKie encouraged his Secretary, William Peart, to write a history of Australia from the age of exploration to Federation. Many of its film illustrations were shot in Queensland.

The show opened with a typical provincial city, Rockhampton’s East Street, shot in September 1901. That same month at Hughenden, Joseph Perry shot Australia's first film of shearing. And film of aborigines at Deebing Creek, near Ipswich, recognised Australia's original inhabitants. Under Southern Skies premiered in August 1902. The presentation featured 100 minutes of film shot in every Australian state plus 200 slides. Sadly, today only stills survive.

Another lost milestone is Australia's first bushranging film, shot by the Salvation Army in outback Winton two and a half years before the more famous Story of the Kelly Gang in Melbourne. A 1904 press report is all that remains.
Sidney Cook and Queensland Topical Film Production

The Limelight operative Sid Cook’s family was growing and in July 1905 he made a move from the meagre salary of a Salvation Army officer to become a commercial film showman. Based in Queensland, Cook became the most prolific Australian filmmaker of the Edwardian era. Cook's camera was the Warwick Bioscope, a great advance on the Lumiere Cinematographe in flexibility and film capacity.

Sid Cook hired Brisbane's His Majesty's Theatre for the Christmas season in 1906 and the program included his startling films of Brisbane’s main thoroughfares shot from a moving tram. On the 27th of December 1906 the Brisbane Courier notice of the films commented that "commencing at the Southern end of Victoria Bridge, and proceeding thence along Queen Street to Petrie's Bight, The Bridge, the Treasury Building, the Courier Building and the premises of leading business firms along the route stand out prominently in a picture with which little fault can be found".

The film premiered at His Majesty's Theatre on Saturday the 29th of December 1906, and was often revived. In 1908 Cook took the film to London on behalf of the Queensland Government for screening at the Franco-British Exhibition. Compiling it together with other Brisbane scenes, in 1911 Cook advertised it as part of his documentary *Living Brisbane*.

**Lord Kitchener’s Visit 1910**

On the first of January 1910 one of Cook’s local competitors, Bert Ive, the impresario of the Woolloongabba Continental and other open-air film venues, filmed the arrival at Brisbane’s Kennedy wharf of Lord Kitchener of Khartoum disembarking from the Queensland Government’s vessel, the "Lucinda".

Kitchener was visiting Australia to advise on the establishment of a National Defence Force. A few thousand spectators turned up on that Saturday afternoon to greet the most distinguished British military figure of his generation - the conqueror of the Sudan and, at 59 years of age, a symbol of Empire.

After inspecting manoeuvres, Kitchener expressed approval of the high standard of horsemanship but was otherwise unimpressed with the small numbers of troops and the outmoded equipment of the tiny force charged with the task of defending a whole continent.

Within five years many of the troops Kitchener inspected would be serving in Gallipoli, France and Palestine. And before World War One’s end, many of the children who had gathered to watch Kitchener take the salute would be buried in the mud of Flanders.

Bert Ive would go on to become Australia’s longstanding federal government cinematographer.
The Impact in Queensland of Australian Newsreel Production

In the pioneering period of Australian when cinema non-fiction film predominated, the Queensland public’s appetite for “topical” films had been well catered for by local producers. But by 1910 the film industry was changing. The jacks-of-all-trades, like Sid Cook and Bert Ive, who shot and screened their films in local halls and travelling shows were giving way to a national motion picture industry "Combine" of distributors and exhibitors and an ever increasing number of purpose built cinemas. These new picture palaces with their regular bills of fare and routine programme changes controlled by the ‘Combine’, threatened to drive out the independent cinema pioneers.

At the same time, across Australia — and across the globe— weekly Newsreels were supplanting the occasional films of topical events. The arrival in Australia in early 1909 of cameramen from the French company, *Pathe Freres*, heralded the introduction of this entirely new type of non-fiction film, the regular weekly newsreel — defined by the trade as a 10-minute one-reel film issued on a regular basis and carrying several news items presented in a magazine or "gazette" format.

The newsreel was a *Pathe Freres’* innovation introduced in France in 1908. Prior to the First World War, France dominated the global film industry and *Pathe* was the biggest film firm in the world. *Pathe’s Animated Gazette (Australasian Edition)* — Australia's first newsreel with wholly local content — was released weekly from 28 November 1910 (almost a year before the debut of the first United States newsreel). Like subsequent news bulletins, the earliest Australian newsreel items mostly dealt with scheduled events that allowed the coverage to be pre-planned. Thus public processions, the laying of foundation stones, funerals, sporting meetings and formal political occasions all featured strongly.

*Pathe* gave Theatre owners cameras to cover local news. In Brisbane one of the first to seize this chance was Al Burne. Soon, Al was not only the projectionist and manager at Kings Pictures at the Lyceum Theatre (now the Dendy) in George Street but was also filming local events using a Pathe camera. Al sometimes teamed up with Bert Kirwin of BK films.

The expansion of the national “Combine" drew together most Australian distributors, some exhibitors and a few associated production companies. Its exhibition wing, Union Theatres is still with us). It also soon formed a single distribution wing, Australasian Films and largely restricted production activities to its newsreel. As previously competing companies like Wests, Spencers, Williams, Amalgamated Pictures and eventually *Pathe* joined together, the independent newsreels were subsumed by *Pathe’s Australian Edition*, which became the *Australian Gazette* in May 1914 and, finally, the *Australasian Gazette* in 1916.

Given that there was a regular supply of cheaper imported drama material available for exploitation, the 'Combine' was wary of the financial risk entailed in supporting local
drama production. This policy was made clear in 1914 when the Australian writer, director and producer, Raymond Longford, challenged the Combine in court and was told "We are not employing any producers. We do not intend to produce any more stars in Australia and with the exception of Gazette-work we won't touch anything in the future."

Production of the *Australasian Gazette* was based at the Rushcutter's Bay studio in Sydney but drew on the work of local "stringers", such as Al Burne and Bert Kirwin, from all around the country. After 1919 Kirwin would become the Queensland "stringer" for the rival Paramount Australian Gazette. By the 1920s, other American film companies such as Fox and M.G.M joined Paramount in producing Australian items for local newsreel release.

The *Australasian Gazette* would be produced weekly with regular Queensland items until — confronted with the prospect of competition from a *Movietone* sound newsreel — the last edition, Gazette No. 943, was issued on 27 March 1929

**Commonwealth Government Documentary Production and Queensland**

Almost from the birth of cinema, Australian Governments had recognised the publicity value of film. But the Commonwealth Government itself didn't become directly involved in film production until late in 1908 when it commissioned — Pathe's contract was not renewed. Instead, in 1911 the Department of External Affairs advertised for "an experienced photographer and Cinematograph operator able to travel continuously throughout the Commonwealth". After the dismissal in May 1913 of the first incumbent following departmental conflicts over wastage of materials due to his "tendency to strive after 'artistic' effects" the post was taken up by the laconic Queensland cinema pioneer, the 38 year old Bert Ive, who would retain the job until his death in 1939.

Ive's output of agricultural scenes, mining processes, livestock raising and sporting carnivals was prolific. But most of these early productions weren't seen by Australian audiences but were sent directly to Britain to assist Australia’s High Commissioner to promote investment and migration to the antipodes.

One of his first films to achieve wide national theatrical release was *Around Australia with the Prince of Wales*, a 6000foot (100 minute) film shot in every state of the Commonwealth in 1920. In the 1920s the Government exhibition policy changed. Now Ives’ Cinema Branch was part of the Development and Migration Commission and its films were given local exposure through weekly release in Australian cinemas as well as circulated overseas. Series like *Know Your Own Country* and *Australia Day by Day* were part of a drive to promote domestic tourism, national pride and “the sale of local
manufacture" alongside overseas investment. And many of them featured Queensland centres, industries and regions.

Commercial Silent Documentaries and Queensland

As the fictional feature film began to dominate the screen, the pioneering period of early cinema was drawing to a close. Now documentary ran the risk of being restricted largely to the form of the newsreels and brief "sponsored" information films which were cast in supporting roles on a feature bill or targeted specialist audiences for products, processes or resources.

While fictional feature film production tended to be concentrated in Sydney, many small documentary outfits existed throughout Australia. In Brisbane, by the late twenties there were at least four firms producing topical items: the ex Salvation Army Limelight cameraman, Sid Cook, shooting local films of schools and town scenics to the order of councils; Bert Kirwin producing advertising material for Topikads; and Al and George Burne working as "stringers" for the Australasian Gazette and other newsreels while also shooting occasional films for the Queensland Government and other clients. Thus when, in 1925, Brisbane’s Ekka was 50 years old, Al Burne celebrated the event with coverage using a new Bell and Howell camera that enabled him to pan smoothly to capture all the action. Around the same time Bert Kirwin documented the formation of the Greater Brisbane Council, then a bold experiment in urban planning.

But soon these Queensland producers, like filmmakers around the globe, would be faced with the challenge of sound.

The Coming of Sound Production to Queensland

Cinema audiences in the 1920s were fascinated by the brave feats of pioneering aviators such as Bert Hinkler, Amy Johnson and Charles Kingsford Smith. Al Burne filmed Amy Johnson's arrival in Toowoomba and Brisbane "exclusively" for local cinemas. And Kingsford Smith's arrival at Eagle Farm in 1929 was big news.

But another arrival was of equal interest to local filmmakers. A Movietone News truck sent up from Sydney brought the first sound camera to Queensland. It was jealously guarded in case rivals pinched any ideas.

The coming of sound was initially a crushing blow to local film production, and its effects were made even worse by the onset of the Depression. For the moment, American domination of local production seemed complete.

For some, including Sid Cook and Bert Kirwin, this marked the end of a long association with motion picture production but for others, including the Burne family and their new venture into sound production, KINETONE, this was just the beginning of a new chapter in the complex story of the cinema in Queensland. A story that interweaves the local, the
national and the global.