PICTURING POLITICS:

Some Issues in the Documentary Representation of Australian Political and Social History


(This Statement is accompanied by four DVD discs, held by the Griffith University Library together with a printout of the Statement)

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Synopsis

This submission groups together four ‘TV Hour’ documentaries — Red Ted and the Great Depression 1994, The Legend of Fred Paterson 1996, The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum 1999, and Stories from the Split: the Struggle for the Souls of Australian Workers 2005 — researched, developed and produced between 1990 and 2005. Each of the submitted documentary films treats an event or individual that made a decisive and lasting contribution to Australian political and social history in the course of the 20th Century. The projects also had the good fortune to win support from institutions such as the Australian Film Commission, the Australian Research Council, the Film Finance Corporation, the Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The selected films may be viewed as representing a sustained exploration of the relations between documentary modes and production practices, the uses of oral history, the institution of television, and certain understandings of Australian Politics. Taken together, the works exemplify some significant issues in the documentary representation of Australia political and social history. All the films take their content from the field of Australian political and social history; all work within the limits of the ‘Television Hour’ — from 51 to 60 minutes for public broadcasters; and all employ a mix of interview and archival materials in their construction. Crucially, the films emphasise the experience, opinions and testimony of participants and witnesses rather than experts. Each film also employs elements of an approach to compilation filmmaking which can be traced to the montage strategy pioneered by the Soviet filmmaker Esther Shub; and celebrated by Jay Leyda in his groundbreaking study Films Beget Films (1964).

As part of their submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Publication at Griffith University, an introductory statement that critically reflects on their production context accompanies the films. This statement indicates the institutional position of the works with regard to the provenance of the archival sources for the productions; the industrial and policy framework of their production; and some theoretical debates relevant to that production. In keeping with the requirements of the degree the statement indicates the way in which the work has developed; demonstrates the contemporary relevance of each publication; clarifies how the publications make an original scholarly contribution to knowledge; provides a thematic overview which converts the individual
publications into an integrated work; and makes clear my contribution to all jointly authored publications.

In the period of the production of the submitted documentaries, the Australian documentary filmmaking community was negotiating new arrangements for the funding, development and circulation of its films. In broad terms, this might be understood as the ‘independent’ documentary sector acknowledging and engaging with the determinant role of the Television broadcasters. At the same time, each project was also influenced by ongoing concerns around the legitimacy of audiovisual treatments of history and the role of oral history in such audiovisual productions. One productive way, therefore, to understand the development of the selected works is to consider, against the backdrop of the conventions of broadcast television, the various strategies employed to engage the audience and contextualise the oral history interviews in each of the selected texts. These strategies include narration, archival compilation, montage of image and interviews; and, in the case of The Legend of Fred Paterson, reconstruction. Arguably, the body of work is informed by major research and benefits from a sound knowledge of film, history and politics. The works have also made a considerable research impact through multiple forms of distribution including the internet, broadcast, non-theatrical sale and inclusion in educational curricula. Taken together, these factors suggest that the oeuvre constitutes an original scholarly contribution to knowledge and understanding in these fields.
Statement of Authorship

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself. Similarly, to the best of my knowledge and belief, my role in collaborative or jointly authored publications submitted here has been fully and accurately described.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Synopsis 2
Statement of Authorship 4
Table of Contents 5
Acknowledgements 6
Abbreviations 7
Preamble 9

Chapter 1
The Role of the Introductory Statement to the Documentary Film 12
Publications Submitted for Examination as ‘Picturing Politics:
Some Issues in the Documentary Representation of Australian
Political and Social History’

Chapter 2
Submitted Documentary Films and Contributions to Jointly Authored
Publications Made by Pat Laughren 1991-2005 17

Chapter 3
A Brief History of Australian Documentary Production 1896-1988 23
Considered as Archival Provenance for the Submitted Works

Chapter 4
Australian Television’s Engagement with Australian Documentary 1980-2005 69
Considered as the Context for the Development of the Submitted Works.

Chapter 5
Audiovisual History, the Broadcast Schedule and the Role of the Oral History
Interview in Contemporary Documentary Practice 93

References 111
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I am especially thankful to Chris Long, my long-term collaborator on Queensland film history and a pioneering archaeologist of early Australian film, for his insights and 'persistence of vision'.

I am also grateful to my Academic Supervisors at Griffith University, Professor Albert Moran and Professor Paul Turnbull for their confidence; and to the Griffith Film School and the Queensland College of Art for their support.

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In particular I would like to acknowledge my wife, Therese Collie, for her patience, encouragement and understanding through more than twenty-five years of filmmaking and beyond.

Last, I am forever indebted to the many interviewees whose testimony it has been my privilege to record and the generations of filmmakers whose productions I have plundered in the compilation of the submitted documentaries.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABA</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<td>ABT</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (forerunner of ABA)</td>
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<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>ACS</td>
<td>Australian Content Standard</td>
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<td>ACTF</td>
<td>Australian Children's Television Foundation</td>
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<td>AFC</td>
<td>Australian Film Commission</td>
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<td>AFCH</td>
<td>Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities</td>
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<td>AFI</td>
<td>Australian Film Institute</td>
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<td>AFTRS</td>
<td>Australian Film, Television &amp; Radio School</td>
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<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
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<td>ANFB</td>
<td>Australian National Film Board</td>
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<td>ARC</td>
<td>Australian Research Council</td>
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<td>ASDA</td>
<td>Australian Screen Director's Association</td>
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<td>AWG</td>
<td>Australian Writer's Guild</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>BTCE</td>
<td>Bureau of Transport &amp; Communications Economics</td>
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<td>CFU</td>
<td>Commonwealth Film Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTVPF</td>
<td>Commercial Television Production Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEET</td>
<td>Department of Employment, Education and Training</td>
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<td>DETYA</td>
<td>Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs</td>
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<td>Dir.</td>
<td>Director</td>
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<td>DOI</td>
<td>Department of Information</td>
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<td>DVD</td>
<td>Digital Video Disc</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOCA</td>
<td>Department of Communications &amp; the Arts (Federal Government)</td>
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<td>EBU</td>
<td>European Broadcasting Union</td>
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<td>Ed.</td>
<td>Editor</td>
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<td>E.P.</td>
<td>Executive Producer</td>
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<td>FACTS</td>
<td>Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations</td>
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<td>Film Australia</td>
<td>Federal Government’s film production unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>FFC</td>
<td>Film Finance Corporation</td>
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<td>FLICS</td>
<td>Film Licensing Investment Company Scheme</td>
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<td>FQ</td>
<td>Film Queensland</td>
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<td>GU</td>
<td>Griffith University</td>
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<td>NFB</td>
<td>National Film Board of Canada</td>
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NFSA
National Film & Sound Archive

NIP
National Interest Program

OLA
Open Learning Australia

PFTC
Pacific Film and Television Commission

PTT
Popular Theatre Troupe

Prod.
Producer

QCA
Queensland College of Art (Griffith University)

SBS
Special Broadcasting Service

SBSI
SBS Independent

SPAA
Screen Producer's Association of Australia

TPS
Television Program Standards

The Act
Broadcasting Services Act 1992

The Accord
FFC documentary investment agreement with TV networks
Preamble

This submission groups together four “TV Hour” documentaries developed and produced between 1990 and 2005. Each of the submitted documentary films treats an event or individual that made a decisive and lasting contribution to Australian political and social history in the course of the 20th Century. The projects also had the good fortune to win support from institutions such as the Australian Film Commission, the Australian Research Council, the Film Finance Corporation, the Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

My engagement with the creative representation of Australian social and political history started in rather different circumstances in the late 1970s when I was privileged to collaborate as a researcher with the playwright Errol O’Neill and the members of the Popular Theatre Troupe on a series of satirical ‘agitprop’ productions whose themes find echoes in the submitted documentaries. Those four shows — the Popular Theatre Troupe’s Australia; Says Who: a New Release on the Media; Out of Work, Out of Mind; and Hands Across the Pacific — were supported by the Australia Council and performed Australia wide in prisons, factories, schools, community halls and theatres.

[In 1986 this collaboration took another form when I wrote a timeline of the historical background to Errol O’Neill’s play Popular Front. A decade later that chronology offered a starting point for one of the submitted documentary productions, The Legend of Fred Paterson.]

The work of companies such as the Popular Theatre Troupe can be seen as one contribution to a continuum of cultural initiatives in Australia in the 1970s. Related developments included the rise of community broadcasters such as 4ZZZFM; the work of the filmmaking organisations such as the Filmmakers’ Co-ops and the Video Access Centres; and the establishment of Community Arts and Cultural Development organisations. At that time the focus for many cultural workers was not so much the medium as the message: Film, Theatre and Radio were each considered effective means of communication and many artists worked across all. Most such practitioners assumed (or indeed embraced the fact) that their work would be excluded from any mainstream conduit to a mass audience such as broadcast television.

Thus, from the late 1970s I worked on film projects that, while often supported by the
Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission, had little prospect or expectation of any conventional theatrical or broadcast exhibition. Despite films such as *Exits, Munda Nyiringu, Bootleg* and *The Road: Voices from Prison* each winning some recognition in terms of awards and festival selection there appeared scant chance of any being part of a broadcast TV schedule. The first sign that things might be changing was the inclusion of *Munda Nyiringu* — a film which I had edited in 1983 for the Fringe Dwellers of the Western Australian Goldfields — in the 1987 ABC TV series, *The First Australians*.

At that point I had just commenced as facilitator on what would prove to be a three year collaboration with the Ngukurr community at Roper River to make *Ngukurr Weya Wi Na*, a history of their settlement from mission times until the period of community control. Ironically, this was the first production to which I contributed which from the outset was aimed at Television broadcast, albeit on the then recently established indigenous broadcaster Imparja TV. [Meaghan Morris offers a generous commentary on *Ngukurr Weya Wi Na* in her 1998 volume *Too Soon, Too Late: history in popular culture* (pp26-28).]

Heartened by the success of that process and by the signs of a developing relationship between the independent film community and the public broadcasters, I and Brian Burkett, the co-producer of *Ngukurr Weya Wi Na*, then pitched to the ABC the project which would become eventually come to fruition as *Red Ted and the Great Depression*. With that film, as with the others submitted for this degree, the aim has been to win prime time broadcast for a subject grounded in Australian political and social history and to generate a resource which might make a lasting contribution to the curriculum in the library and the class room.

To date, the first three of the submitted productions — *Red Ted and the Great Depression, The Legend of Fred Paterson* and *The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum* have achieved that goal. At the time of writing, negotiations to realise a broadcast ‘cut’ of *Stories from the Split* are ongoing.

Along the way, in part through the need to identify archival sources for the submitted projects, I have become increasingly interested in the history of earlier Australian documentary production and, with support from the ARC, the PFTC and the National Film and Sound Archive have, with the assistance of Chris Long, researched and
produced two narrated compilations which showcase Queensland’s documentary film pioneers. The two outcomes from that fascination achieved thus far — *Queenslands First Films 1895—1910: Surprising Survivals from Colonial Queensland* and *Queenslands Silent Films 1910—1930: The Newsreel Years* — have been released by the NFSA.
CHAPTER 1

The Role of the Introductory Statement to the Documentary Film
Publications Submitted for Examination as ‘Picturing Politics: Some Issues in the Documentary Representation of Australian Political and Social History’

The Role of the Introductory Statement

This introductory statement accompanies a set of Digital Video Discs (DVDs) of four documentary film publications submitted in accord with Griffith University’s PhD by Publication policy. Each of the four DVDs contains one documentary film in which I have played a significant role as a creative principal.

The submitted documentary films are:

1994 *Red Ted and the Great Depression* Director/Co-writer
1996 *The Legend of Fred Paterson* Co-director/-writer
1999 *The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum* Director/Writer/Producer
2005 *Stories from the Split: the Struggle for the Souls of Australian Workers* Director/Writer/Co-producer

(Further details regarding these submitted productions and my contributions to their authorship are provided in Chapter Two.)

I propose that the viewing of the submitted films and the consideration of the issues canvassed in the following chapters of this statement together fulfil the criteria for award of the PhD by Publication by:

- Indicating the way in which the work, as manifest in the publications, has developed;
- Demonstrating the contemporary relevance of the publications;
- Making clear the way in which the publications make an original and scholarly contribution to knowledge; and
- Providing a thematic overview.

Aim

The aim of this statement is not to offer a detailed production history of each of the submitted documentaries but rather to suggest the institutional position of the works with
regard to:
  • The provenance of the archival sources for the productions;
  • The industrial and policy settings of the productions; and
  • The theoretical backdrop to the productions.

Before proceeding further it may be helpful to offer a brief justification for the selection, development, contribution, relevance and unity of the submitted works.

The selection of the submitted documentary films

I have selected these films from others made over a twenty-five year period primarily because:
  • They share a common engagement with the representation of Australian political and social history;
  • They share aspects of oral history methodology;
  • They share an engagement with the commissioning and licensing procedures of public broadcast television.
  • They share unambiguous contributions from myself as a ‘creative principal’

In short, each of the submitted films finds its content in key incidents or personalities from the field of Australian political and social history, each works within the limits of the ‘Television Hour’—a duration from 51 to 57 minutes for public broadcasters—and each employs a mix of interview and archival materials in its construction.

The production context and development of the submitted works

The documentary film publications selected for this submission were researched, developed and produced over some 15 years from 1991 to 2005. Throughout this period the Australian documentary filmmaking community was negotiating new arrangements for the funding, development and circulation of its productions. In broad terms, this might be understood as the ‘independent’ documentary sector acknowledging and engaging with the determinant role of the Television Broadcasters. (FitzSimons 2002; O’Regan 1993) Key factors in these negotiations included:
  • The establishment of the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1988;
  • The establishment of the Documentary Accords between the FFC and the TV Broadcasters in 1991;
• The emergence of Electronic and Digital production and distribution technologies;
• The decline of the role of ‘in-house’ production at Film Australia and the Television Networks.

While each of the selected documentary publications has been shaped by these shifts in the national mediascape, the development of each project has also been influenced by the ongoing debates around:
• The contested status, role and legitimacy of audiovisual treatments of history; and
• The contested status, role and legitimacy of oral history.

The essence of these contests is, on the one hand, a perceived tension between the academy’s demand for scholarship and the broadcaster’s expectation of audience engaging entertainment (Watt & Kuehl in Smith 1976); and, on the other, the relatively unproblematic use of oral history procedures in many formats of broadcast and other documentary production despite oral history itself having long been subject to substantial historiographical critique (King 1981; Youdelman 1982; Nichols 1984).

Accordingly, I propose that one productive way to understand the development of the selected works is to consider, against the backdrop of the conventions of broadcast television, the various strategies employed to engage the audience and contextualise the oral history interviews in each of the selected texts. These strategies include narration, archival compilation, montage of image and interviews; and, in the case of The Legend of Fred Paterson, reconstruction.

The unity of the body of work, its contemporary relevance and original scholarly contribution

In general terms I contend that the submitted body of work is unified and made contemporarily relevant by its progressive articulation of theoretical and practical concerns with documentary form in a changing industrial, technological and cultural context. In particular, I suggest that the selected films may be viewed as representing a sustained exploration of the relations between documentary modes and production practices, the uses of oral history, the institution of television, and certain understandings of Australian politics.
Each of the films emphasises the experience, opinions and testimony of participants and witnesses rather than ‘experts’. Each film also employs an approach to compilation filmmaking which can be traced to the montage strategy pioneered by the Soviet filmmaker Esther Shub and celebrated by Jay Leyda in his groundbreaking study *Films Beget Films* (1964).

Arguably, the body of work submitted is informed by major research — thereby meeting the requirement for the demonstration of a high-level capacity for independent research — and also benefits from a sound knowledge of film, history and politics. In addition, the work has made a considerable research impact through multiple forms of distribution including the internet, broadcast, non-theatrical sale and inclusion in educational curricula.

Taken together, these factors suggest that the oeuvre constitutes an original scholarly contribution to knowledge and understanding in these fields.

**The function of the ensuing chapters**

Chapter Two lists the publications being submitted for examination and indicates the multiple roles I have performed in making these films. It also clarifies my contribution to jointly authored publications.

Chapter Three considers a brief history of Australian documentary production from 1896 to 1988 in order to explore the provenance of the archival sources drawn on in the compilation of the submitted productions.

Chapter Four considers Australian Television’s shifting engagement with the documentary form from the late 1970s until 2005 in order to contextualise the development of the submitted works.

Chapter Five considers debates concerning the place of audiovisual history in the broadcast schedule and the role of the oral history interview in documentary practice in order to consider the contemporary relevance of the submitted works.
It is proposed that, in tandem with a viewing of the submitted films, the chapters of this statement establish the development of the submitted works, their unity, contemporary relevance and original scholarly contribution.
CHAPTER TWO
Submitted Documentary Films and Contributions to Jointly Authored Publications Made by Pat Laughren 1991-2005

DVD 1 Red Ted and the Great Depression

Statement of Authorship by Pat Laughren for Red Ted and the Great Depression

1994 Red Ted and the Great Depression
Developed with support from the Australian Research Council (ARC), the Australian Film Commission (AFC), the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC), Film Queensland (FQ) and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)
Broadcast: 8.30 p.m. August 31 1994, ABC Wednesday Night Special;
Distributor: Film Australia

Director/Co-writer (with P Davies, B Burkett and O Johnston)

I was the director of this broadcast documentary.

This involved:

- Conducting the oral history style interviews which formed the basis of the production,
- Selecting the motion picture archival material used in the production
- Selecting the archival photographic stills used in the production
- Selecting the archival documents used in the production
- Selecting the audio archival material used in the production
• Commissioning the original score

• Working with the editor, Owen Johnston, throughout postproduction

I was also the co-writer of this broadcast documentary with P Davies, B Burkett and O Johnston.

This involved:

• Co-writing the original first draft script and proposal with Brian Burkett, my partner in Mungana Films

• Co-writing the subsequent drafts of the script and proposal with Brian Burkett, Owen Johnston and AFC funded script editor, Paul M Davies

• Writing the final narration script

DVD2  The Legend of Fred Paterson

Statement of Authorship by Pat Laughren for The Legend of Fred Paterson

1996 The Legend of Fred Paterson (57 min)

Developed with support from the Australian Research Council (ARC), the Australian Film Commission (AFC), the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC), Film Queensland and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

Broadcast: 9.30pm April 11, 1996 ABC View from Here series
Distributor: Ronin Films
Co-director (with J. Dawson)
Co-writer (with J. Dawson and O. Johnston)

With my then Griffith University Colleague, Adjunct Professor Jonathan Dawson, I was the co-director of this broadcast documentary.
Jonathan Dawson wrote the original draft script, *Red Tides*, and directed the production’s dramatized sequences.

Together, we conducted the oral history style interviews which formed the basis of the production.

In postproduction I was responsible for

- Selecting the motion picture archival material used in the production
- Selecting the archival photographic stills used in the production
- Selecting the archival documents used in the production
- Selecting the audio archival material used in the production
- Commissioning the original score
- Working with the editor, David Huggett, throughout postproduction

I was also a co-writer of this broadcast documentary

This involved:

- Contributing to the development of the production script drawn from the 3rd draft of *Red Tides* authored by Jonathan Dawson and Owen Johnston
- Writing the final narration script
Statement of Authorship by Pat Laughren for The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum

1999 The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum (57 min) 1999

Developed with support from Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs under the Discovering Democracy programmed (DETYA), Open Learning Australia (OLA) and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

Distributor: ABC

Broadcast: 8.30pm November 2 1999 ABC Inside Story series

Producer/Director/Writer

I was the Producer/Director/Writer of this broadcast documentary.

This involved:

- Writing all original scripts and proposals
- Conducting the oral history style interviews which formed the basis of the production,
- Selecting the motion picture archival material used in the production
- Selecting the archival photographic stills used in the production
- Selecting the archival documents used in the production
- Selecting the audio archival material used in the production
- Commissioning the original score
- Working with the editor, David Huggett, throughout postproduction

- Writing the final narration script

**DVD4**

*Stories from the Split: the Struggle for the Souls of Australian Workers*

**Statement of Authorship by Pat Laughrren for Stories from the Split: the Struggle for the Souls of Australian Workers**

2005

*Stories from the Split: the Struggle for the Souls of Australian Workers* (58 mins)


Development supported by the Australian Research Council (ARC), the Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities (AFCH) and the Pacific Film and Television Commission (PFTC)

Screened Friday April 15 2005 in Victorian Legislative Assembly

Writer/Director/Co-producer (with Owen Johnston)

I was the **Director/Writer** of this oral history documentary.

I was also the **co-producer** with Owen Johnston.

The role of **director/writer** involved:

- Conducting the oral history style interviews which formed the basis of the production,

- Selecting the motion picture archival material used in the production

- Selecting the archival photographic stills used in the production
• Selecting the archival documents used in the production

• Selecting the audio archival material used in the production

• Working with the editor, David Huggett, throughout postproduction

• Writing the text of the inter-title cards which segment the film

My role as co-producer involved

• Developing the original and subsequent proposals with Owen Johnston

• Identifying prospective interviewees

• Identifying and retrieving indicative archival material
CHAPTER THREE
A Brief History of Australian Documentary Production 1896-1988
Considered as Archival Provenance for the Submitted Works

Since the 1960s broadcast television has increasingly become both the key commissioner and provider of an audience for documentary and, as many writers have observed, this means that television is now a 'formative influence' on documentary production (Kilborn and Izod 1997, p. 7). Each of the submitted documentary films has been produced in the shadow of the broadcasters and that influence. But each production has also employed elements of the compilation film genre and thus drawn extensively on the accumulated Australian archival film heritage generated by prior documentary, factual and dramatic producers. Accordingly, to appreciate more fully the production context of the submitted documentaries, this chapter considers the historical development of the documentary in Australia from its inception until just prior to the implementation in 1988 of the Accord, the institutional arrangements framing its current production.

My aims in this chapter therefore are twofold. First, in order to clarify the provenance of archival documentary material employed in the submitted films, I outline the history of Australian documentary production from the earliest footage shot in Australia in 1896 up until the 1980s when television unarguably replaced the cinema as the dominant mode of documentary circulation. Second, through this sketch of a history of the shifts in the genres and patterns of documentary production and distribution in Australia, I hope to enable an appreciation of the differences from, and the continuities with, the period in which the submitted films were produced. That period, which is considered in some detail in the following chapter, begins with the formation of the Australian Film Finance Corporation in 1988 and the negotiation of a documentary 'Accord' with broadcasters and the independent production sector. It continues to the time of writing.

A note on the literature

While acknowledging Beilby and Lansell's pioneering 1982 collection, *The Documentary Film in Australia*, and the concern shown to the documentary in Shirley and Adams' *The Australian Cinema*, there is as yet no definitive consolidated history of Australian documentary production. When Trish FitzSimons, Dugald Williamson and I reviewed the literature on the Australian Documentary in an article in *Metro* in 2000, we wrote:
Despite its long history there are only two books devoted exclusively to the Australian documentary. Ross Lansell and Peter Beilby presented their edited volume, *The Documentary Film in Australia*, as an attempt to remedy the 'neglect' of their subject. Albert Moran's *Projecting Australia* focuses on government film, which was predominantly documentary, in the post-war period. ... It identifies key changes in the governmental framework, including the movement towards deregulation and diversification of documentary production, but the last film it considers was released in 1988. There are various shorter writings on particular documentary film-makers and movements, often containing broader references to institutional structures. Further discussion of documentary is contained in works on Australian independent and experimental film-making especially from the 1960s on.... This literature covering the period up to the late 1980s shows the links that existed between the form and content of documentaries, the concerns of practitioners, and the organisational contexts of their work - for the institutional and independent sectors respectively. (FitzSimons et al 2000)

The historical sketch which follows is a development from an invited presentation delivered at the Australian International Documentary Conference in 2003. That presentation, like this chapter, drew on the primary research associated with the submitted productions and a survey and collation of the available secondary literature. At the outset I am pleased to acknowledge my obvious debt to the work of authors such as Moran, Long, Beilby, Lansell, McMurchy, Shirley, Williams, Ansara, Milner, FitzSimons, Williamson, Dunlop and the many others who have undertaken individual studies of documentary filmmakers, institutions, periods or genres in Australia.

**A Brief History Of Australian Documentary 1896-1987**

The history of the Australian documentary begins with the first films produced in Australia and, arguably, it is documentary production and circulation which has provided the thread of continuity running through more than a century of Australian filmmaking. As my colleague Chris Long has demonstrated, before the 1970s Australian films predominantly played a supporting role to imported films and up until that time at least 80 per cent of Australian footage was made up of short non-fiction films: documentaries, newsreels and advertisements (in Mayer et al 1999, pp. 109-115).
While the Australian industry has often been treated as a scaled-down version of the American experience, the evidence suggests that in the local production industry narrative feature films were the exception rather than the rule. (Collins 1987) Our early industry was generally unwilling or unable to finance the studio facilities, screenwriters and star system necessary for fiction production. However, topical, newsreel and documentary production was an entirely different matter. Studio facilities could be minimised and individual cinematographer-directors could 'make a go of it' for long periods in the field, working for, or under contract to, government departments, newsreel companies and distribution agencies. (Shirley and Adams 1983, pp. 3-19; Long in Mayer et al 1999, pp. 109-115) The surviving archival legacy of such filmmakers provided a major resource for the production of the submitted social history compilation documentaries.

Some Categories

'Documentary is a clumsy description, but let it stand'. So wrote John Grierson, the 'Godfather' of the British documentary movement, in 1932. Grierson — who is generally credited with coining the definition of documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality' — was grappling with 'the array of species' snared under his single net. (in Hardy 1979, pp. 35-46)

A philosopher by training, Grierson observed that the use of 'natural material' was regarded as the crucial distinction separating the documentary project from fictional film production.

Where the camera has shot on the spot (whether it shot newsreel items, or magazine items or discursive 'interests' or dramatised 'interests' or educational films or scientific films proper...) in that fact was documentary [even though] they all represent different qualities of observation, different intentions in observation, and, of course, very different powers and ambitions at the stage of organising material. (in Hardy 1979, p. 35)

Grierson proposed 'after a brief word on the lower categories, to use the documentary description exclusively of the higher'. A glance at the history of the Australian documentary reveals a similar range of styles, genres and approaches. These include
the ground-breaking late 19th century work of the Salvation Army Limelight Brigade; the ethnographic tradition pioneered at the turn of the 20th century by Baldwin Spencer; the ‘promotional’ films of the Federal government’s Cinema Branch and its successors, the Commonwealth Film Unit and Film Australia; the silent and sound newsreels; and the often under appreciated ‘in-house’ productions of public and commercial television. Crucially, it includes the films of individual Australian documentarians who have achieved international reputations such as Frank Hurley, Damian Parer, John Heyer, Robin Anderson, Bob Connolly, Tom Zubrycki and Denis O’Rourke. Not to mention, of course, the work of many more unsung toilers. (Beilby & Lansell 1982; FitzSimons, Laughren & Stocks 1997; Moran & Veith 2005)

Some 70 odd years after Grierson first voiced his reservations, that awkward term ‘documentary’ remains obdurately in place in the theory, practice and institutions of filmmaking. And — as Bill Nichols and other scholars have pointed out — for most filmmakers and audiences, much of the documentary form’s special authority still stems from its status as evidence from the world. In particular, from its ability to bear witness, provide testimony, and give voice to people’s real experience; thereby enabling audiences and society to see timely issues in need of attention. (Nichols 1991, pp. 109–118)

Instructively, Grierson’s distinctions still found a place at the heart of the Australian Broadcasting Authority’s 1996 definition of the documentary form which stated that a

'documentary program' means a program that is a creative treatment of actuality other than a news or current affairs, sports coverage, magazine, infotainment, or light entertainment program. (ABA 1996)

**Documentary Traditions**

Historically, the documentary tradition has been an inclusive one. As Grierson’s contemporary and sometime colleague Alberto Cavalcanti put it, ‘in documentary three fundamental elements exist: the social, the poetic and the technical’. (in Barsam 1973, p. 63) In line with this international practice, Australian documentary filmmakers have not hesitated to draw on montage, surrealism and dramatisation alongside the perhaps now more familiar triad of narration, interview and observation.
Nor have Australian documentary storytellers shirked grappling with the demands of character development, psychology, suspense and rhythm as well as those of accuracy, persuasion and advocacy.

Unsurprisingly, there have been almost as many subsequent attempts to theorise and categorise the documentary as there have been varying approaches to, and rationales for, its production. For example, when confronted by the seeming ubiquity of ‘Reality TV’, the British scholar of television, John Corner (2000, pp. 1-7), proposed four fundamental documentary projects which he distinguished largely on institutional rather than textual grounds. These are:

- **Democratic Civics**: This is the classic “Griersonian” Documentary whose task is seen as providing publicity for citizenship and whose production is funded (directly or indirectly) by official bodies;

- **Journalistic inquiry and exposition**: This is the “Current Affairs” Documentary as reporting which has been perhaps the most extensive use of documentary methods on television (at least until very recently);

- **Radical interrogation and alternative perspective**: This is the “independent” Documentary — often marked by a formal experimentation not routinely found in broadcasting — whose authorial position is neither “official” nor journalistic but a critique of the dominant accounts in circulation;

- **Diversion**: This is Documentary as “popular factual entertainment” — currently often characterised as “reality TV” — whose design is seen not as “sweetening the pill” in order to convey information but solely to entertain and attract the maximum audience.

Each of Corner’s (2000) categories — and perhaps more — finds plausible resonance in the Australian scene. But the story of the Australian documentary — and of some of the archival footage employed in the submitted productions — begins decades before either Grierson’s proselytising or television’s dominance as documentary’s primary window.
The Beginnings of Australian Documentary Production

In August 1896 the American magician, Carl Hertz, gave Australian audiences their first taste of film projection. Limited by the magazine capacity of the early cameras, the film program was a potpourri of 60-second scenes which mixed actualities such as the British Derby, traffic on London Bridge, and rough seas at Dover, with brief theatrical scenes and one-joke comedies. (Long 1993 Part 2)

Though Hertz floated the idea of filming that year's Melbourne Cup, he lacked the necessary camera. It was the Lumiere Brothers' Australasian agent, Marius Sestier, and the Australian society photographer, Walter Barnett, who, after test filming a 'fine picture of a crowd disembarking from a Manly ferry', hurried to Melbourne for the Melbourne Cup of 3 November 1896. The Bulletin remarked:

'It is something beautifully appropriate that the first Australian picture presented by the new machine should be a horse race'. (in Shirley and Adams 1983, p. 8)

Hertz had made no attempt to screen his film items in any logical or narrative order. Indeed the novelty of the apparatus and the very fact of projected motion pictures were considered attractions enough. But on Melbourne Cup Day, Sestier shot ten films covering the event from the arrival of the excited crowd by train to the presentation of the Cup to the winner. Though each of the individual films was shot from a fixed viewpoint on a single sixty-second reel with no cuts, pans or tilts, when screened in chronological sequence at the Criterion Theatre in Sydney on 24 November 1896 with an accompanying lecture, this first all-Australian film program offered an integrated documentary presentation with

'all the bustle and animation of the racecourse being brought up before the audience with the same vividness as if they were looking upon the actual moving figures'. (in Long 1993 Part 3, p. 41)

Significantly, Walter Barnett's knowledge of 'who was who' enabled him to stage-manage the filming, directing proceedings for the camera and even appearing in three of the surviving films. (NFSA Living Melbourne 1988)
While magic lanternists had routinely organised their slide presentations thematically, spatially and temporally, the screening at the Criterion Theatre was one of the world's first motion picture programs to be presented with a sense of continuity. Soon, profitable promotions such as the Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee films of 1897 would make it commonplace to assemble films of similar character and provide a narrative thread by way of lecture.

Formally and conceptually, this thematic and observational unity — and the decisive role of the expository lecture or narration — marked a clear and lasting shift from the practice of the first film exhibitors who had aimed at programs of maximum variety with as little similarity as possible between films. (Elsaesser 1990; Fell 1983) This expository legacy finds continued expression in the role still played by the narrator in a large proportion of contemporary documentary production. With the exception of Stories from the Split, narration is employed in each of the submitted films.

Arguably, we may consider Sestier and Barnett to be harbingers of Corner's journalistic project and, as such, precursors of the newsreel format which would prove to be a key source of archival film material for subsequent producers including myself.

**Major Joseph Perry and the Salvation Army Limelight Department**

The Salvation Army's Limelight Department under Major Joseph Perry was Australia's outstanding pioneer cinema producer. In hindsight, the Department's productions can been regarded as including elements of two of the documentary projects in Corner's typology: Democratic Civics and Radical Interrogation and Alternative Perspective.

As Chris Long emphasises, far from being purely a religious film producer, the Limelight Department — so named for the gas-heated lime-block, 'limelight', used to illuminate its slide presentations — was also a significant commercial venture raising funds for the Army's social and religious work. In March 1896, after a fire had destroyed his entire limelight plant and lantern slide projection outfit, Perry's experience of the kinetoscope peep-show which had set up opposite the Limelight Department's Bourke St Melbourne building in 1895 led him to include motion pictures in the Department's refurbishment. At first, motion picture film was seen as an extension of lanternslide presentations and was used with varying combinations of live music, slides, gramophone records and lectures. But there was a steady increase
in the scale of the Limelight Department’s film production such that, at a time when most commercial production favoured topical shorts and travelogues, Perry’s range soon extended to brief didactic dramas. (Laughren in Sabine 1995)

Alongside actuality of the Salvation Army’s activities, Perry began to include staged case studies such as the story of ‘Bayswater Bob’, a lad redeemed from a life of petty crime and retrained as a farmer at the Salvation Army’s Boy’s Home. This new usage of film not only introduced the docudrama genre to the Australian repertoire but also foreshadowed one of documentary form’s central roles by using the lure of motion pictures to catch an audience off-guard and challenge them to combat the conditions depicted. (Long 1994 Part 8, pp. 34-41)

By 1902 the Limelight Department’s 150-minute presentation of Australian history from white exploration to Federation, *Under Southern Skies*, included some 6000ft (100 minutes) of film from around Australia. During the same period, the Limelight Department also made a series of “sponsored” documentaries and actualities including “scenics” of Victorian beauty spots made for the State Government; coverage of the departure of troops to quell the Boxer rebellion in China in 1900; and commercial films of biscuit making and chocolate manufacture. (Long 1994, Part 7) When the New South Wales government wanted to document Australia’s Federation it turned to the Limelight Department.

In January 1901 Perry produced Australia’s first film approaching feature length, the 35-minute, *Inauguration of the Commonwealth*. As Perry proudly claimed:

> We enjoy a monopoly of the business and manufacture of films for all the colonies. Only the other day I took a photo of the Victorian contingent in the morning, developed and printed a film of 100ft long, and six hours later it was shown before a crowded hall amidst great applause. (in Adams & Shirley 1983, p. 12)

Archival selections from this production have become icons of the foundation of the modern Australian state and, as such, were incorporated in one of the submitted films *The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum*.

In December 1907, Perry and the Limelight Brigade could lay claim to another ‘first’.
Their production of *Salvationists Imprisoned at Sale (Victoria) for Street Obstruction*, a widely exhibited record of religious persecution was arguably the first politically motivated Australian documentary film. (Long 1995 Part 16, p. 80)

**Colonial Government Documentary Production**

The Limelight Department could not, however, claim to have undertaken the earliest government sponsored documentary production in Australia. On the evening of 17 November 1899 an invited audience had gathered in the boardroom of the Queensland Colonial Agricultural Department in Brisbane 'to witness a series of cinematographic pictures which it is proposed to send to the old country to add to the interest of the lectures being delivered there on the subject of emigration'. Next day the Brisbane Courier commented that:

"These moving pictures .... represent selected scenes from the rural and town life of the colony and will be useful in giving intending emigrants a truer conception of life in the fields of the sunny south than can be conveyed by the words of the lecturer'. (in Laughren with Long 1995, p. 31)

The Australian colonies had been quick to seize on the photograph as a means of promoting their resources at international expositions and the prospect of the Greater Britain Exposition in 1899 induced the Queensland Government to supplement its usual photographic and lantern-slide displays with motion pictures. The responsibility for the preparation of these fell to Fred C. Wills, the recently appointed artist/photographer of the Queensland Department of Agriculture. (Laughren in ADB 2005, p. 283)

Early in 1899 Wills travelled to Sydney to acquire a Lumiere Cinematographe and the expertise to operate it. Returning to Queensland, he and his assistant, Henry Mobsby, commenced the world's first 'in-house' government film production, shooting some 30 one-minute films between March and October that year. While most of these illustrate agricultural processes such as wheat and sugar harvesting — and are the earliest Australian industrial documentary films and amongst the world's earliest films of the type — Wills also covered topical events such as the opening of parliament. Many of these 60 second rolls are constructed in sequences of two or three camera set-ups and are intended to be screened in a set order so as to build up a logical, narrative picture
of the activities depicted.

Wills made the earliest surviving Australian films employing sequential editing techniques. He observed in a lecture in 1900,

When a subject takes more than one film they are joined with the aid of amyl acetate with some of the celluloid dissolved in it. (in Laughren & Long 1995, p. 35)

Wills’ films exhibit an artist’s care in composition and often employ adroit “cut-ins” from an initial wide view of the scene — what would come to be called the “establishing” shot — to a closer more detailed point of view. This is early evidence of the documentary coverage’s contribution to the development of visual grammar and to techniques for time compression and exposition in motion pictures.

At a social level, this series of films is also important for its images of "Kanaka" labourers at work — cheap Melanesian manpower working under conditions resembling slavery. The use of this labour, which was actively encouraged by the Queensland Agriculture Department, ceased with the advent of Federation. Selections from this footage were used in The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum one of whose key informants was Faith Bandler, the daughter of a victim of ‘blackbirding’. (Laughren 1996)

Ethnographic Film

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. Chris Long and I have given an account of how in 1898, the Cambridge anthropologist, Alfred Cort Haddon, led a team of scientists on a field expedition to the Torres Strait. The 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 75ft rolls of raw film to record Islander dances, ceremonies and customs. (Long & Laughren 1993 Part 6, pp. 32-37)
Despite the problem of film magazines 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 after they played a part in the Australian High Court's deliberations in its historic Mabo decision.

Haddon had been sufficiently impressed by the documentary capacity of motion pictures to write in 1900 to Baldwin Spencer, the Australian anthropologist preparing to lead an expedition to Central Australia:

You really must take a kinematograph — a biograph — or whatever they call it in your part of the world. It is an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus. I have no doubt that your films will pay for the whole apparatus if you care to let some of them be copied by the trade. (in Long & Laughren 1993 Part 6, p. 59)

Spencer promptly followed Haddon's advice and obtained a Warwick Bioscope camera. At the time of this journey to the Centre, Spencer was both the foundation Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne and the recently appointed Director of the National Museum of Victoria. His chief collaborator on the expedition, and the person responsible for stimulating Spencer's interest in Aboriginal life, was the former telegraphist and Alice Springs postmaster, Frank Gillen. On 11 December 1900 Gillen wrote to Spencer asking: 'Have you had any experience in working the machine & if not where are you going to gain it?' In the autodidactic spirit of so many subsequent documentary makers, Spencer taught himself on the job when he commenced filming on 3 April 1901 at Charlotte Waters in Arrente territory:

A diagram showed how to fix the film in the machine, so as to make it run round, but no instructions had been sent out as to what rate to turn the handle, so I had to make a guess at this. The focussing glass was, of necessity small and you could only get a sideways and not a direct view of it...all I could do was to stand the machine on one side of the ceremonial ground, which was simply an open space in the scrub, focus for the centre of it and hope for the best...When the performers came on to the ground I was ready or them, and started grinding away as steadily as I could at the handle. [Without a pan head] the chief difficulty was that the performers every now and then ran off the ground into the surrounding...
scrub, returning at uncertain intervals of time, so that now and again, in the expectation of their suddenly reappearing, and fearful of missing anything of importance, I ground on and on securing a good deal of monotonous scenery but very little ceremony. (in Long 1994 Part 11, p. 57)

After the filming was concluded, the exposed footage was sealed in tins and sewn into calico bags and despatched to Melbourne, where Baker and Rouse arranged for the processing work to be done by the Salvation Army Limelight Department. On 30 April news came up the telegraph line to Alice Springs that the Charlotte Waters films had reached Melbourne. Meanwhile, Spencer had continued filming, despite the fact that:

The heat was so great and so dry that, after the camera had been exposed and used for some time, the wood began to shrink and slight cracks made their appearance. It needed constant watching, and stuffing up the cracks with black worsted and porcupine-grass resin, to keep the machine light proof. (in Long 1994 Part 11, p. 80)

The expedition's shoot finished on 11 May 1901 by which time more than 40 minutes of film had been taken — more than had been devoted to any single subject in Australia up to that time. Finally, on 15 May telegraphic news reported the successful processing of their Charlotte Waters footage: 'Baker and Rouse report films exposed fairly correct ... but machine too far away from object taken'.

Baldwin Spencer gave the world's first major public screening of ethnographic film at the Melbourne Town Hall on 7 July 1902. The presentation combined 30 minutes of film, 100 slides and audio selections from field recordings made on wax cylinders; and, with no hesitation, it included secret sacred material. Despite the comparatively high admission charges of one and two shillings, Spencer attracted capacity crowds as he traced the life of the Aborigine from birth to death covering physical appearance, environment, material technology, social systems and, finally, ceremonial life. This 'entertainment' was delivered about 50 times in Melbourne and provincial centres. (Long 1994 Part 11, pp. 80-82; Dunlop 1979, pp. 111-119)

A decade later Spencer would produce other Northern Territory films. Part of this
1912 footage was shot by the first official Commonwealth Government cameraman, J.P. Campbell. But, as the distinguished Australian ethnographic filmmaker Ian Dunlop notes, the later films lack the pioneering creativity of the earlier footage. Presciently, Baldwin Spencer reflected on his lack of success in capturing scenes of domestic life:

I spent some time trying to get cinematograph pictures of camp life. It would be quite easy to do this with a small hand machine of which, after a while, they would take little notice, but a large one attracts too much attention and makes their actions rather unnatural. (in Leigh 1988, p. 81)

Subsequent ethnographic and government film production concerning indigenous and other issues are crucial resources exploited in the construction of at least one of the submitted films, The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum.

Australian Newsreel Production Begins

In the pioneering period of Australian cinema as elsewhere, non-fiction film predominated. (Fell 1983) In particular, topical 'actuality' films were one of the mainstays of early cinema as pioneer filmmakers shot films of local events, businesses and schools in order to induce the participants to pay to see themselves on the screen.

As Mimi Colligan’s groundbreaking study has shown, even before the advent of film, Australia had developed a tradition of theatrical entertainments such as cycloramas, dioramas, waxworks and paintings of current happenings that served a function similar to the modern news film or telecast. By 1891 there were cycloramas in Adelaide, Launceston and Sydney, but their profitability was threatened by the Depression of the 1890s and their claims to ‘wonderful realism’ were challenged by motion pictures. (Colligan 2002; Laughren in Sabine 1995, p. 6)

In May 1898 Sydney’s Mark Blow made Australia’s first unscheduled news film when he shot the square-rigger, the Hereward, aground on Maroubra Beach. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, filmmakers like the Queensland-based ex-Salvation Army cameraman, Sid Cook, or Ernest Higgins, who ‘hit the big time’ with his sensational footage of the Burns-Johnson heavyweight fight in 1908, produced hundreds of local and topical interest films. (Long 1993 Part 4, pp. 34-39)
But it was the arrival in Australia of cameramen from the French company, Pathe Freres, in early 1909 that heralded the introduction to Australia of an entirely new type of non-fiction film, the regular weekly newsreel. The newsreel itself had been a Pathe Freres' innovation, first introduced in France in that same year. (Fielding 1972, pp. 66-70)

Prior to the First World War, France dominated the global film industry and Pathe was the biggest film firm in the world, producing a complete range of film stock, cameras, projectors as well as educational and dramatic films. The *Pathe Journal* promised a

Living newspaper of the World from Paris fashions to the most important Political News, all recent events happening in any part of the world brought vividly before your eyes in actual motion. (Laughren 2003)

*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). By the film trade's definition, a newsreel was a 10-minute one-reel film issued on a regular (most often weekly) basis and carrying several news items presented in a magazine or "gazette" format. 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 developed affiliations with the newspapers like the Melbourne *Argus* and the Sydney *Sun* to provide 'tip-offs' for their cameramen, for many of whom the Gazette offered a first opportunity for regular filmwork. (Long in Mayer 1999)

Within two years of Pathe's introduction of the Australian weekly newsreel several other competitors had entered the field. These included *William's Weekly*, which featured camera work by the Queensland film pioneer, Bert Ive, and the *Gaumont Graphic*, which marked Frank Hurley's first motion picture efforts. But the days of such a wealth of newsreel producers were numbered. (Laughren 2003)

*‘The Combine’ and the Australasian Gazette*

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the organisation of the film industry
was changing. Just as regular weekly Newsreels were replacing occasional films of topical events, so the itinerant Australian picture showmen who screened films in local halls and travelling shows were giving way to an industrial ‘Combine’.

As Bertrand and Routt have shown, commencing in 1910 ‘The Combine’ drew together most Australian distributors, some exhibitors and a few associated production companies. It set up an exhibition wing, Union Theatres (which is still with us as Greater Union) and soon formed a single distribution wing, Australasian Films. (in Moran and O’Regan 1989, pp. 3-27)

The new picture palaces, with their regular bills of fare and routine programme changes controlled by the ‘Combine’, began to drive out the independent cinema pioneers who had shot and screened their own films. As previously competing companies like Wests, Spencers, Williams, Amalgamated Pictures and eventually Pathé joined together, the independent newsreels were subsumed by Pathé’s Australian Edition, which became the Australian Gazette in May 1914 and, finally, the Australasian Gazette in 1916.

Given that it had 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’. (in Bertrand 1989, p. 80)

Production of the Australasian Gazette was based at the Rushcutters Bay studio in Sydney but drew on the work of “stringers” around the country. The Gazette would be produced weekly until — confronted with the prospect of competition from a Movietone sound newsreel — the last edition, Gazette No. 943, was issued on 27 March 1929. (Laughren 2003)

By the 1920s the American film companies Fox, M.G.M and Paramount were also producing Australian items for local newsreel release. Before its demise in 1930, Paramount’s Australian Gazette ran to some 650 issues of wholly local content. The
speed of newsreel production improved as equipment became lighter, and "faster" film stock capable of performing in lower light became available. This meant that accidental, unplanned events — such as the collapse of a viewing platform injuring one hundred onlookers during the American fleet's visit in 1926 — could be captured by the camera. (Long in Mayer et al 1999)

But the newsreels rarely broached controversial or political topics. When Bert Cross managed to film rioters and looters for the Australasian Gazette during the famous Victorian police strike of 1923, the Federal Government promptly placed an export ban on the issue. Despite such limitations, the surviving legacy of this silent newsreel production has provided a major source for the visual treatment of Australia's social and political history. (Bowring 2000, pp. 12-13)

**Commonwealth Government Documentary Production**

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 Pathé — then the world's largest film producer — to promote the nation on film. (Williams 1995a; Bertrand & Collins 1981)

Pathé's manager, Leopold Sutto, convinced the newly elected Labor Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, and the External affairs Minister, E.L Batchelor, of the potential international exposure Pathe could give Australia and Pathe was promptly provided with a 2000 pound grant to produce of 15 one reelers on Australian scenic and industrial subjects selected by the government. While there is no record of disquiet at this level of government 'editorial' control, the fact that no local producer was given an opportunity to tender for this production was deeply resented by the local industry. (Shirley & Adams 1983)

Initially, Pathe's production proceeded quickly and efficiently enough. But after unsatisfactory reports on the quality of the 'scenics' from Australia's representative in London, Captain Collins, Pathé'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'. (Cooper 1965, p. 43)
Among the thirty men who applied for this new position were Frank Hurley, Bert Cross and Lacey Percival — all of whom would later become famous directors and cameramen — but the successful applicant was a prize winning art photographer, the 43 year old James Pinkerton Campbell. During his brief and stormy eighteen-month appointment, Campbell managed to shoot almost 20000 feet of film but departmental conflicts over wastage of materials due to his ‘tendency to strive after “artistic” effects’ led to his dismissal in May 1913. A report on the circumstances of Campbell's sacking established the department's policy for much subsequent production:

The Department simply requires prints of useful advertising value of good technical quality, sharp and clear. To meet the demand of the High Commissioner’s Office, for the present at any rate, ‘artistic’ quality must, to a large extent be sacrificed to quantity. (in Cooper 1965, p. 44)

Campbell’s replacement as Commonwealth Cinematographer in the Photography Branch of the Department of External Affairs was the laconic Queensland cinema pioneer, the 38-year-old Bert Ive, who would retain this position until his death in 1939. Ive’s output of agricultural scenes, mining processes, livestock raising and sporting carnivals was prolific and by March 1914 he had shot over 100000 feet (28 hours) of film. As Chris Long points out, most of these early productions were not seen by Australian audiences but were sent directly to Britain to assist the Australian High Commissioner’s endeavours to promote investment and migration to the antipodes. One of Ives’ first films to achieve wide theatrical release in Australia was Around Australia with the Prince of Wales, a 6000ft (100 minute) film shot in every state of the Commonwealth in 1920. (Laughren 2003)

In the 1920s the Federal Government’s exhibition policy changed. By then, Ives’ Cinema Branch was part of the Development and Migration Commission and, as well as being circulated overseas, the Commission’s films were given local exposure through weekly release in Australian cinemas. Series such as 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” in addition to attracting overseas investment. One Australia Day by Day instalment, Telling the World (1929), even covered the Commonwealth’s own cinema production activities.
Though the Cinema Branch continued to expand, the editorial policy concerning government films remained unchanged and critical, political or social comment was frowned upon. Corporate documentaries, travelogues and industry studies were all that successive governments demanded of their cameramen. Over the years the Cinema Branch would move from External Affairs to the Development and Migration Commission and finally to the Department of Markets but the purpose of all its production is best summed up in the name of the file documenting the Branch’s activities. The file is simply titled: “Advertising Australia”. (Laughren 2003)

Despite the seeming narrowness of purpose motivating such productions they have nonetheless provided a vivid resource for subsequent producers. Many of whom — myself included — have opted at times to work the material “against the grain” of its original bucolic or celebratory purpose.

Commercial Silent Documentaries 1910-1930

By 1910 as the pioneering period of early cinema drew to a close and the fictional feature film began to dominate the screen, the documentary seemed to run the risk of being restricted to the newsreel or brief sponsored information films cast in supporting roles on a feature bill. But just when factual films appeared set for a period of decline a new form of documentary emerged produced by a new figure, the documentarist as ‘explorer’. In Australia the major players in this new field were Frank Hurley and Francis Birtles. (Beilby & Lansell 1982, pp. 24-25, 135-138)

Frank Hurley

As Martha Ansara’s article in Metro (1998, pp. 35-40) recounts, in 1910 the 25-year-old Frank Hurley was a successful commercial photographer when Douglas Mawson selected him in preference to more experienced cinematographers for his 1911-12 Expedition to the Antarctic. To that time Hurley had filmed a single Gaumont newsreel item; but this arduous trek would be the first of six journeys to the Pole. So successful was Home of the Blizzard (1913) — his film of Mawson’s expedition — that Hurley’s appointment as its official photographer was a condition of the finance of the ill-fated Shackleton Imperial Trans-Atlantic Expedition of 1914-16. Hand-cranking in temperatures as cold as minus 70 degrees Hurley shot the extraordinary feature length film In the Grip of the Polar Pack Ice (1917) before returning to take up
the position as the first official AIF photographer.

Hurley served in France and Palestine with the honorary rank of Captain but his tendency to employ all the tricks of the trade to dramatise his subject matter was a cause of conflict with the head of his unit, the journalist/historian, C. E. W. Bean. This tension between Bean's passion for accurate documentation and un-manipulated actuality and Hurley's desire to invoke patriotic support for the troops can be seen as prefiguring the continuing clash of priorities between scholarly accuracy and a desire to engage an audience. (Ansara 1998, p. 38)

In North Africa Hurley travelled with General Sir Harry Chauvel's Lighthorse and made the four-reeler *With the Australians in Palestine* (1918). After the War, with aviation exciting the popular imagination, Hurley shot a record of the first flight from England to Australia, *Sir Ross Smith's Flight* (1919). When thousands turned out in Sydney to greet the record-breaking aviator, Hurley was there, filming from the aircraft itself, having joined the last leg of the journey from Queensland. (Long in Mayer 1999) Again, Hurley did not hesitate to augment actuality with tricks and outright fakery such as "aerial views" filmed over shaking postcards. Such ploys were quite common in the newsreels of the period and, as Ansara implies, they presage many of the concerns about the evidentiary status of documentary materials which have been raised in subsequent debates by critics such as Winston (1995, 2000) and Ruby (1996, 2000).

Hurley next turned his attention to a series of films produced in Papua and New Guinea, the most successful of which was *Pearls and Savages* (1922). Hurley returned to Australia with 22000 feet of film, 1200 glass negatives and cylinder field recordings. His trip had been documented, serialised and syndicated around Australia through the Sydney Sun newspaper. As Graham Shirley has pointed out, Hurley was a showman who knew how to work the press and the public and the release of *Pearls and Savages* was widely anticipated. Hurley's earlier successes had led to his association with the 'Combine' without whom it was almost impossible for local producers to get theatrical distribution. Union Theatres appointed a young Ken G. Hall as publicist and the film opened in Sydney on 3 December 1921 at the Globe Cinema. (Hall 1977, pp. 128-131; Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 87-88)

At this time the term 'documentary' had yet to be coined. Hurley described *Pearls*
and Savages as an ‘illustrated travelogue entertainment’. It incorporated his engrossing lecture, hand-tinted lanternslides and a musical score that included transcriptions from his field recordings. The film itself had hand-tinted segments and the combination of the footage, the music, the colour and Hurley’s own lecture made it a spectacular success which ran three times a day every day for five weeks. For any film to run for more than a week in the 1920s was good business but for a documentary such a response was extraordinary. (Ansara 1998; Jackson 1998; Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 87-88).

Hurley’s combination of technical mastery, skill as a publicist, and willingness to mix actuality and ‘fakery’ in the service of a clear editorial line raises issues which are still at the heart of many debates about ethical and other protocols for documentary producers. I would be the first to acknowledge considerable sympathy for Hurley’s practice and recognise that in the compilation components of the submitted films footage from diverse provenances — including fictional features, topicals and advertising shorts — is routinely employed to represent or evoke particular characters, places and periods.

Francis Birtles

Michael Leigh has identified Francis Birtles — dubbed ‘Cyclist, Explorer, Kodaker’ in his publicity — as the first Australian producer to popularise the feature documentary of outback travel that would become one of the staples of the Australian documentary slate. An important component of such films has been the representation — or, more often, misrepresentation — of Indigenous culture. (in Murray 1988, p. 79)

In 1988 Leigh calculated that the Australian cinema had shown such an interest in Aborigines that there were then well over 6000 films made about them. Indeed, he suggested that the most lasting ‘star’ of the Australian screen was the Australian landscape, with Aborigines seen as a component of that picture, typically depicted as either one of the continent’s natural wonders or as evolutionary curiosities.

Birtle’s contribution to this genre began in 1911 with Across Australia with Francis Birtles, a 50 minute record of a bicycle trip from Sydney to Darwin. The film was predominantly scenic but also included dramatised interludes such as battles between early settlers and traditional aboriginal landowners. (Bertrand 1974, pp. 30-35) In
1913 Birtles was the first person to drive a car from Sydney to Perth and in 1914 his motorcade to the Top End was covered in collaboration with that other ‘documentary showman’ Frank Hurley. The resulting Into Australia’s Unknown was amongst the earliest filmic accounts of Aboriginal traditional customs in the ‘Top End’ as well as local station life. During the four months’ filming the films negative was developed en route and despatched to Australasian Films. (Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 37-38)

Birtles’ next film was his first solo effort, Across Australia in the Track of Burke and Wills (1915). He followed this with another outback venture, Through Australian Wilds: Across the track of Ross Smith (1919) which followed overland the route of Smith’s famous aerial journey. Australia’s Lonely Lands (1924) was Birtle’s last trek film. (Bertrand 1974, pp. 30-35)

His only surviving film, Coorab in the Island of Ghosts (1921), is of quite a different kind. Co-directed by Torrance McLaren, Coorab blends stock footage from earlier expeditions with scenes staged in Sydney in order to produce a dramatised documentary tale of a forbidden love in a gerontocracy. While some have categorised it as ‘the epitome of curio-pastiche’, it remains, nonetheless, one of the few Australian feature films with an entirely indigenous cast. (Leigh in Murray 1988, p. 83) Many of the issues regarding appropriate strategies for contextualising such footage remain central to the construction of one of the submitted films, The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum.

Other Commercial Documentary Producers

No other documentary producers of this period achieved the fame or notoriety of Hurley or Birtles. Most, like the ex-commercial traveller turned filmmaker, Charles Herschell, of Melbourne’s Herschell Films concentrated on producing ‘anything to order’ in the line of travelogues, industrials and topical. (Long in Mayer 1999)

While fictional feature film production tended to be concentrated in Sydney, many small documentary outfits existed throughout Australia. For example, in Brisbane by the late 1920s there were at least four filmmakers producing topical items. These were the former Salvation Army Limelight cameraman, Sid Cook, who continued to shoot local films of schools and town scenes; Bert Kirwin, whose firm Topikads concentrated on producing topical advertising material; and Al and George Burne were
working as 'stringers' for the *Australasian Gazette* or Paramount newsreels while also shooting occasional films for the Queensland Government and other clients. (Laughren 2003)

Now all these documentary producers, like filmmakers around the globe, would be faced with the challenge of sound. (O'Brien 2005)

The Coming of Sound

At first, the coming of sound to the Australian Cinema threatened to offer a crushing blow to local film production, and its effects were made even worse by the onset of the Depression. Experimental sound coverage of the opening of the Federal Parliament in the new capital of Canberra in 1927 marked the first test of the medium. While major city theatres were wired for sound at the beginning of 1929, local producers were unprepared and undercapitalised for the changeover and many withdrew altogether. (Long in Beilby & Lansell 1982, pp. 33-35; Long in Mayer 1999; Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 103-107)

With the arrival of the Moviетone sound newsreel van in Sydney in August 1929, American domination of local production seemed to many to be a *fait accompli*. The first Fox sound item was an interview with the newly elected Labor Prime Minister, James Scullin, on 2 November; and the first full-reel issue presenting the 1929 Melbourne Cup was released a day after the race on 6 November. By the start of 1931 the early Fox newsreel editions with one or two local items had expanded to completely Australian content and these Moviетone items would prove invaluable in the production of *Red Ted and the Great Depression*.

However, though the silent *Australasian Gazette* had been a casualty of the coming of sound, Bert Cross, the Australasian Films laboratory supervisor, had promptly initiated a series of sound production tests with a view to returning to newsreel production. As early as October 1929 a Melbourne company had released the first issue of *The Australian Talkies Newsreel* utilising an unsatisfactory "sound on disc" technology synchronised with the film. Cross commissioned the Tasmanian radio engineer, Arthur Smith, to develop a sound-on-film system. (Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 106-107) With Smith's success, Ken Hall was appointed to supervise the production of a series of shorts where, initially, sound was added to the originally silent documentaries *Thar*
*She Blows, The Wonderland of North West Australia, Peeps at Darwin and Mysteries of Arnhem Land.* These were press previewed in mid-February 1931 and were followed by the more ambitious two-reeler, *That's Cricket*, which was shot at the Sydney cricket ground and featured speeches and demonstrations by members of the Australian Eleven including Don Bradman. Finally, November 7th 1931 marked the premiere of the long running *Cinesound Review* produced by Ken G. Hall for Union Theatres. (Shirley & Adams 1983, p. 116; Edmondson 2003, pp. 138-140)

The *Cinesound Review* and *Movietone* would be rivals until their merger as Australian Movie Magazine in October 1970. (Shirley & Adams 1983, p. 107) Their legacy, now controlled by Rupert Murdoch's *Filmworld*, continues to provide a major archival source for filmmakers seeking to construct effective treatments of Australian social history.

**Documentary Production in the 1930s**

**Frank Hurley**

Martha Ansara recounts how Frank Hurley had returned in 1931 from his last trip to the Antarctic to find Australia in the grip of the Great Depression with capital and jobs scarce. But Ken G. Hall at *Cinesound* — who had handled the publicity for three of Hurley's documentary films in the 1920s and felt that 'the name Captain Hurley was worth its weight in gold' — lost no time in announcing Hurley's appointment as the studio's chief cameraman. (Ansara 1998, p. 40; Hall 1977)

From 1932 to 1935 Hurley wrote, directed and photographed not only Cinesound's documentaries but also some of its dramatic features. But, as Ken Hall subsequently acknowledged, Hurley was too much of a perfectionist for the give-and-take needed on a feature film crew and in 1936 Hurley transferred to a better-paid position as head of Cinesound's industrial documentary division. Hall promoted this as the “Frank Hurley Unit” and publicised Hurley as the ‘Camera Wizard of the Southern Hemisphere’. (Hall 1977, p. 59) Hurley's output for most of the decade consisted of travelogues (such as *Jewel of the Pacific* about Lord Howe Island or *Treasures of Katoomba* showcasing the scenic attractions of the Blue Mountains in the guise of a treasure hunt) and industrials (like *Pageant of Power* and *Brown Coal to Briquettes* produced for the State Electricity Commission in Victoria). He also produced *Here Is*
Paradise for the centenary of South Australia.

Hurley's major and highest profile productions in these years were his formalist documentation of the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Symphony in Steel (1932), and the celebratory A Nation Is Built (1938) made for Australia's sesquicentenary.

Other Commercial Documentary Producers

In the NFSA video Efftée's Australia (1989) Chris Long and Ken Berryman confirm that Frank Thring Sr's Efftée Films and Herschell's Films were in the forefront of documentary production in Melbourne. For Efftée, Arthur Higgins produced the series Cities of the Empire which featured Melbourne, Sydney and Ballarat. Another Efftée associate was the North Queensland based Noel Monkman, a musician-turned-naturalist who had come to prominence with a series of micro-cinematography sequences for Movietone. From a base on Green Island in the Barrier Reef, Monkman and his wife Kitty produced natural history shorts before embarking on dramatic feature productions. (Beilby & Lansell 1982, pp. 34-35)

In Brisbane, the Burne family film company, Kinetone, devised its own solution to the problem of sound production and contributed to the rival newsreels while maintaining their own slate of regular commissioned production. (Kinetone 1996) The best known of these is A Brief Survey of the Activities of the Brisbane City Mission (1939) which has somewhat anachronistically come to provide some of the most iconic imagery representing the impact of the Great Depression in Australia. Unsurprisingly, footage from this film finds a place in Red Ted and the Great Depression.

Commonwealth Government Production and the Introduction of Sound

The Commonwealth Government's Cinema and Photographic Branch moved into sound production early in the 1930s when the Officer-in-Charge, Lyn Maplestone, persuaded the Federal Government to finance the installation of up-to-date equipment whose cost was defrayed through hire to Frank Thring's Efftée Films and Movietone among others. (Williams 1995a, p. 33; Shirley & Adams 1983)

Its first sound production, Australia Calling, was a travelogue cut from silent stock
footage. But for Graham Shirley and most other critics, the documentary highlight of the Branch's production in this period was *Among the Hardwoods* (1936). This 'lyrical account of timber getting in the south west of Western Australia' imaginatively used natural sound and inter-titles without resorting to the wall-to-wall commentary and soporific organ music accompaniment more typical of the majority of the Cinema Branch's films of this period. (Shirley & Adams 1983, p. 130) Despite, or perhaps partly because of their relative aesthetic impoverishment, these Commonwealth Cinema Branch films have been frequently plundered by subsequent filmmakers like myself in search of materials to construct a representation of daily activity in the 'Hungry Years' of the 1930s.

In 1939, two events set the stage for significant shifts in the organisation and nature of Commonwealth Government documentary production. One was the death of Bert Ivey, the Branch's long time chief cinematographer, who succumbed to a bout of pneumonia caught while filming. The other was the outbreak of the Second World War.

**Australian Documentary Production in World War Two**

In March 1940 the 'Godfather' of the British Documentary movement, John Grierson, arrived in Australia for a month-long tour on behalf of the Imperial Relations Trust for whom he had also visited two other British Dominions, Canada and New Zealand. Grierson's purpose was to advise on the role film could play in national life and in strengthening Empire ties. (Moran 1991, p. 2)

In both Canada and New Zealand, the respective Governments acted promptly on Grierson's recommendations by establishing the National Film Board of Canada and the New Zealand Film Unit; but in Australia a National Film Board was not set up until 1945. Instead, with the outbreak of war, a Film Division was established in the Department of Information as a means of controlling and co-ordinating film production for and about the war effort. The Division had several war correspondents who were attached to the Australian armed forces in the Middle East and the Pacific and who supplied footage for newsreel and other purposes. But the Division made few films itself. (Moran & O'Regan 1985, pp. 72-84)

Almost everything the Film Division produced for the DOI was in fact made by commercial production companies such as Cinesound and Chauvel productions. DOI
sponsored propaganda films included Charles Chauvel's *Soldiers without Uniform* and Ken G. Hall's recruiting featurette *100,000 Cobbers*. The Film Division also recruited cameramen such as Damien Parer, Frank Hurley, Roy Driver, Frank Bagnall and William Carty whose footage was used in *Cinesound* and *Movietone* newsreels. The most celebrated of these, Damien Parer's 1942 Oscar-winning edition of Cinesound Review, *Kokoda Front Line*, simultaneously captured the savage and confused fighting in the New Guinea jungle and provided a touching portrayal of the Australian soldiers and their native bearers. The Academy Award citation was presented to *Kokoda Front Line* for its distinctive achievement in Documentary production. For its effectiveness in portraying, simply yet forcefully, the scene of war in New Guinea and for its moving presentation of the bravery and fortitude of our Australian comrades in Arms. (in McDonald 1994)

In a revealing letter to the photographer Max Dupain, Parer set out what he was hoping to achieve in his work:

1. To build a true picture of the Australian soldier in movie & stills. 2. To make good movie single reelers showing cause & effect (something after the March of Time idea) of why we are here, & what we are doing in the long range perspective as it affects us & Australia. 3. To keep newspapers and newsreels supplied with really hot spectacular news. (in McDonald 1994, p. 57)

Damien Parer's titular boss was Frank Hurley who, with the advent of the war, had been determined to film at the front once again. Despite being initially rejected for overseas service, Hurley’s connections and reputation secured his appointment as the Head of the Department of Information's Cinematographic and Photographic Unit in the Middle East. (Ansara 1998) But as Martha Ansara argues, World War Two suited Hurley's style even less than the previous war and the younger filmmakers like Parer and the sound recordist Alan Anderson, saw Hurley's style as 'somewhat old hat'. The 55-year-old Hurley not only insisted that they recreate battle episodes that they hadn't been able to capture live but spent what seemed to his younger colleagues to be an unnecessary amount of time and care in composing artistic shots. Anderson recalls being nonplussed when Hurley refused to shoot a dramatic hit on enemy aircraft because his camera was scratching. Hurley could not adapt to the aesthetic of the
younger filmmakers who, as Anderson put it, felt 'there's no requirement for perfection in war, just getting what is happening'. (Ansara 1998, p. 41) This was an approach exemplified — though with an artist's eye — by Damien Parer, whose ability and determination to get close to the action resulted in emotional effects which were entirely alien to Frank Hurley's nature. In 1943 Hurley to take up the position of Director of British Army Features and Propaganda Films for the British Department of Information.

In addition to the Australian Department of Information's footage Movietone was also able to draw on the Canadian National Film Board documentaries and their innovative techniques were admired and imitated. Soon, the demands of war itself changed the style of the newsreels as an emphasis on the constant need for more engaging and persuasive propaganda led to stronger statements often expressed in full-reel specials which circulated through the flourishing newsreel theatres. (Moran 1987; Shirley & Adams 1983, p. 167)

The Australian National Film Board and a New Documentary Aesthetic

Albert Moran, Deane Williams and other commentators have shown how in wartime Australia, a new spirit of artistic resurgence began to emerge in the documentary field as the functionalism and realism of work like Parer's was buttressed by the ideas of the Griersonian documentary movement. (Williams 1995a) Now, rather than being regarded as merely an adjunct to marketing primary products, film — and documentary film in particular — was instead recognised as a powerful medium of information capable of being mobilised to break down sectionalism, promote a national viewpoint and, in Grierson's words, 'bring into the public imagination the problems, responsibilities and achievements of Government'. (in Moran and O'Regan 1985, p. 72)

Such views encountered considerable resistance. Ansara (1998, p. 41) has documented how for years afterwards, amongst the older school of Australian cameramen, the term "documentary" would signal a middle-class concern with aesthetics and social concerns which had never been in the brief of the cameramen-directors of Bert Ivie's or Frank Hurley's generation. Ansara and Moran have both suggested that these shifts were part of wider changes taking place in Australian society.
After a decade of Depression which had demoralised the country, a new sense of nationalism was developing in tandem with wartime solidarity and industrial expansion. Film societies, which were one element of this new cultural spirit, developed a more intellectual appreciation of cinema's capacity for education and social development. In September 1944 the Department of Post-War Reconstruction — whose then secretary, Colin Dean, would himself become a documentary filmmaker — hosted a Commonwealth Film Conference of representatives from state and federal government departments, state education systems, universities and community film societies which recommended that a National Film Board be established. In April 1945 the Australian National Film Board was set up by Federal Cabinet decision. A foundation board member, Professor Alan Stout from the University of Sydney stated that the Board

Is not just a Government propaganda machine. In their own productions, they seek to give a true and objective picture of Australian problems, to encourage self criticism rather than complacency, to inform rather than to sell a policy. (in Shirley & Adams 1983, p. 177)

In May 1946 the Grierson acolyte, Stanley Hawes, took up the position of Producer-in-Chief, a position he would hold for the next 23 years. By late 1946 eight films had been produced. Of these Moran considers the most notable were Native Earth, a John Heyer film about Australia's trusteeship of Papua and New Guinea, and Watch Over Japan, another Heyer film describing the post-war occupation of that country. (in Moran and O'Regan 1985, pp. 79-84; Moran 1991) But Heyer's films proved to be the exceptions. More common was the newsreel-like Australian Diary which echoed the Know Your Country format of the 1920s. By the end of 1953, more than one hundred and fifty films and some seventy-two issues of the Australian Diary series had been produced. In the post-title sequence of The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum, I use an Australian Diary item to open a window onto accepted national attitudes to indigenous Australians in the early 1950s.

As Moran emphasises, most of the films produced in this early period by what came to be called the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU) — and later Film Australia — addressed the subject of nation building. Notable titles included School in a Mailbox, The Canecutters, The Valley is Ours, Journey of a Nation and Mike and Stefani. The thirty or so on staff included John Heyer, Maslyn Williams, Colin Dean and Catherine
Duncan. (Moran 1987) The majority of the films produced were in the classic
documentary style: off-screen voiceover exposition of a problem or issue accompanied
by images acting as both particular illustrations and as anchorage for the commentary.
However, a few such as Maslyn Williams' Mike and Stefani, employed strong
elements of dramatisation with a more impersonal voiceover. Shot by Williams and
Reg Pearce in Europe in 1948 and 1949, Mike and Stefani captured the plight of
displaced people in the post-war world. Williams had set out to make a film about the
work of the International Refugee Organisation and opted to tell that story by using the
vehicle of one couple at one camp in Germany trying to persuade an Australian
emigration officer to give them permission to migrate to Australia. While the couple
waited to hear whether they had been accepted, Williams reconstructed the details of
their lives since the 1930s. For equipment, the filmmakers had only what they could
carry between them: a 35mm camera, a half-dozen or so lights and a wire recorder.
Moran, Williams and other rightfully note the film's affinities with the neo-realist
filmmaking emerging in Italy. But such "experiments" remained the exception. The
Commonwealth Film Unit was anxious to ensure that its films were circulated in the
commercial cinemas and the cinema managers of the time were unwilling to accept
any film over 10 minutes in length. This brevity discouraged any untoward lyricism,
poetic sequences or sustained exposition and analysis.

Ansara and Moran both document how from its inception there had been a number of
tensions apparent at the Commonwealth Film Unit. These included not only the split
between the older 'newsreel trained' filmmakers and the younger 'documentarians',
but also differences between those, like John Heyer, who were seen as adopting an 'art
form' approach and those, like Stanley Hawes, who favoured a more 'social and
political' standpoint. The victory of the Menzies Liberal Country Party Government
in 1949 and the acceleration of the Cold War saw many of the Unit's creative pioneers
leave as political and stylistic orthodoxy became the order of the day. (Moran 1987;
Ansara & Milner 1999)

The Cold War and Australian Documentary Production

The suspicion of conservative politicians and others about documentary makers
seemed confirmed when John Grierson resigned his post as Chief Film Commissioner
of the National Film Board of Canada after allegations of involvement in communist
espionage. Increasingly, it became dangerous for documentarians to be associated
with the political left. (Evans 1991; Shirley & Adams 1983, p. 179; Ansara & Milner 1999; Milner 2003)

In Australia, in the wake of the screening of the locally made *Indonesia Calling* — Joris Iven's pro-Indonesian nationalist documentary — political suspicion fell on the Film Unit. Ivens, the internationally acclaimed maker of *Spanish Earth* (1937), had made *Indonesia Calling* independently and clandestinely in Sydney in 1945 and 1946. Responding to the outcry at the release of this Peter Finch narrated production, Prime Minister Chifley assured parliament that the new ANFB's production arm had played no part in its making. (Bertrand & Collins 1981, p. 115) This was true in an institutional sense but many individuals in the unit had helped out on the production voluntarily. (Moran & O'Regan 1985, pp. 350-361) Soon there were rumours of a federal security service "plant" in the Unit and, as factionalism continued, some of the unit reported the innocent political activities of fellow members to the security authorities. Nonetheless, apart from the staunchly anti-communist shorts, *Menace* and *One Man's War*, most writers argue that there is a general lack of overt political content in the Unit's films in these years. (Williams 1995b; Moran 1991, p. 40)

**Political Filmmaking Begins in Australia**

Charles Merewether suggests that the first record of Australian independent political film production dates from 1934. In that year a group of Sydney filmmakers were reported to have made *Struggle to Win* about the Wonthaggi Coalminer's strike which would later be the subject of Richard Lowenstein's 1984 feature, *Strikebound*. In the 1930s, however, most leftwing film activity by groups such as the Friends of the Soviet Union revolved around the exhibition and discussion of Soviet and other left films. The struggle in the Spanish Civil War was a key subject for many such screenings and it provided the impetus for Ken Coldicutt's *Fighter's Return* (1939), a record of the return from Spain of the Australian Brigadiers and the Australian Nursing Unit. (in Moran & O'Regan 1985, pp. 338-349)

From 1945 Ken Coldicutt, Bob Matthews and others formed the Realist Film Association of Victoria which began the nationwide distribution of European progressive and political cinema with each program accompanied by a series of notes, discussion pamphlets and a monthly newsletter. They also set up a film unit and for five years struggled to produce short documentaries, newsreels and compilation films.
(Williams 1995b)

In 1952, inspired by the example of Joris Ivens, the Waterside Workers Federation's Sydney branch established the WWF Film Unit which lasted until 1958 and produced a dozen documentaries on such issues as the need for pensions, the problem of housing shortages and the importance of union solidarity. The Unit had as its core the collaborative team of Jock Levy, Keith Gow and Norma Disher, all of whom had been participants in political theatre at Sydney's New Theatre. (Ansara & Milner 1999; Milner 2003) The WWF Unit's most impressive and ambitious film, *The Hungry Miles*, chronicled the history of the Sydney waterfront. The highlight is its reconstruction of the Depression years using hundreds of wharfies — many of whom had lived through those bitter experiences — to re-enact scenes of unemployment and scuffles for jobs. (Milner 2003) In 1956, Cecil Holmes, who had worked with the New Zealand National Film Unit and was invited to Australia to join the Shell Film Unit, collaborated with the Wharfies to make *Words for Freedom*. (Shirley & Adams, p. 189)

I am but one of the many subsequent documentarians who have turned to the productions of the WWF Film Unit in search of material with which to represent the role of labour and the world of work with its attendant struggles to organise to challenge social and industrial conditions.

**Post World War 2 Commercial Documentary Production**

**Newsreels**

In 1946, using funds accumulated through wartime currency restrictions, Ken G. Hall directed *Smithy: the immortal story of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*. This would be Hall's last feature film. Cinesound retreated from regular feature film production to concentrate on its newsreel the *Cinesound Review* and also continued the wartime tradition of producing single-reel specials on topics ranging from wildlife conservation and soil erosion to matters of health, slum clearance and Aboriginal welfare. Another issue treated by the newsreels was the fear of Communism. In April 1949 a *Movietone News* special — 'Sharpley on Communists' Sinister Aims' — featured the former Communist party Secretary, Cecil Sharpley, denouncing the Red Menace to Australia. And in 1953, as the Cold War threatened to heat up, Cinesound achieved a scoop
covering the departure from Sydney airport of Mrs Vladimir Petrov whom two Russian couriers were trying to spirit out of the country. By 1970 Cinesound had also produced more than 200 sponsored 'industrial' documentaries which continued to provide a training ground for new talent. But, in a sign of a changing industry, in December 1956 Ken Hall had left Cinesound to become Chief executive of Frank Packer's newly launched television corporation which operated Sydney's TCN Channel Nine among other stations. (Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 196-197)

**John Heyer and The Back of Beyond**

In his 2001 Obituary, Deane Williams recognised that while filmmakers such as John Kingsford Smith of Kincroft and Mervyn Murphy of Supreme Films had been prolific producers of sponsored documentaries, John Heyer was the most celebrated individual documentarian of the post World War Two period. (Williams 2001)

Heyer began his career in the early 1930s working with Damien Parer as apprentices on productions by Frank Thring Snr, Charles Chauvel and Ken Hall. Both Heyer and Parer were enthusiastic subscribers to international publications such as *Close Up*, *Cinema Quarterly* and *Experimental Cinema*, which provided a connection to the international documentary community. They were also keen students of the Soviet Cinema with Heyer going so far as to pen an unanswered letter of application to the State Film School (G. I. K) in Moscow.

Heyer's interests were more in the international language of cinema than in ideology and he was at the forefront of the burgeoning film society movement in the 1940s. In 1945, after working as Second Unit director on Harry Watt's 'docudrama', *The Overlanders*, Heyer was appointed as the initial Senior Producer at the ANFB. He brought to that post his enthusiastic knowledge of the international context of documentary production. This can be most clearly seen in the strong echoes of Pare Lorentz's *The River* and *The Plow that Broke the Plains* in Heyer's *The Valley is Ours,* his final film as an employee of the Commonwealth Film Unit.

In 1949 Heyer joined the Shell Film Unit for whom he made a large number of trade and educational films exclusively for the use of the Shell parent company. Graham Shirley recounts how in 1952, given a brief 'to make a film reflecting the essence of the Australian character' and complete artistic control so long as the budget did not
exceed 12000 pounds, Heyer opted to cover the 300 mile fortnightly drive of outback postie, Tom Kruse, along the Birdsville Track. In Spring 1952, after a research trip with Kruse, Heyer began five weeks on location with five trucks of equipment. Throughout the shoot, dust and flies tormented the 20 technicians and non-professional actors. Back in Sydney at Supreme Sound, Heyer edited the film himself. Characters were re-voiced by professional actors and Mervyn Murphy and Gwen Oatley created the film's complex soundtrack. (Shirley & Adams 1983, p. 194)

On its release in 1954 over 750000 people across Australia saw The Back of Beyond in non-theatrical screenings. And that year — in a first for any Australian feature film — it won the Grand Prix at the Venice International Film Festival. As Deane Williams (2001) so rightfully concludes, Heyer's work introduced a wider technical and conceptual range to the field of Australian documentary production. In particular, his accomplished handling of montage, character, composition and narrative greatly enhanced the palette of strategies available for subsequent Australian producers.

The Queen in Australia: Commonwealth Documentary in the Fifties

Albert Moran notes that by 1954, when the Commonwealth Government's Film Division made The Queen in Australia, its first feature length 35mm colour production, many of the early documentarians like John Heyer had already departed. In 1956, the year television was introduced to Australia, the Division became the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU). Over the next decade the CFU's staff and annual output would almost double, though much of this production was now undertaken to meet the departmental needs of a growing federal bureaucracy rather than the more ambitious and creative goals of the CFUs own national programme, which had been scaled down. Moran (1991) suggests that the Unit's morale in these years was not improved by two major Federal Government enquiries into its operations or the persistently voiced view, in Government and commercial film industry circles, that the Unit's mission could be fulfilled equally well by independent producers.

In Projecting Australia, Moran (1991) documents how, organisationally, a more strictly demarcated hierarchy replaced the concept of the 'generalist' filmmaker as the CFUs ageing staff were increasingly restricted to more specialist technical roles. For example, Alan Anderson, who in the early phase had been both a sound recordist and occasional director, was by the mid-fifties purely a sound specialist and would not get
his chance to direct again until the late 1960s. (Ansara & Milner 1999) This organisational rigidity was echoed by an increasing aesthetic conservatism. The classical ‘Voice of God’ style hardened into an unimaginative orthodoxy that became the ‘house style’. Moran’s analysis of the typical government film of this period suggests that the expository ‘voice’ of the documentary was always professional, confident, authoritative, male, and neither particularly young nor old; a voice striving to transcend class and sectarianism by its very lack of colour. The tone is well caught by a perceptive critic, Neil Beggs, who in 1960 wrote his assessment, ‘The Heart Seems to Have Gone’, for the *Film Journal*:

The faults of Australian documentary are legion. After seeing a few dozen, one begins to suspect that all the scriptwriters were trained in radio, that the cameramen have not grasped the idea of movement and excitement in their subject, and that the editors have had no say in the photography and shooting-script of the films (if there has been a shooting script ... The root of the trouble, the cause of the decline in the artistic standards of the unit — not the technical standards — is the overload which has been put on the unit in recent years. Not only are the half dozen directors required to make films to a tight schedule, they are also detailed to work in fields of study in which they have no interest and no past knowledge. The burden has been added, it seems, as production techniques have been progressively routinised. The cost accountant took over with his own criteria of efficiency; now the completed products roll out with that spray painted look of the assembly line. The smug polish of the after dinner speech replaces the careful compilation of the significant details of some well-known field, which alone gives poetic revelation to documentary ... The artists and craftsmen are hardly to be blamed for the limits set by the low goals of the bureaucrats in the front office. If the overwhelming bulk of production must meet a demand for glossy creature, made hurriedly with cheap canned music, any artistic touches will be lost or seem affected. (in Moran & O'Regan 1985, pp. 100-103)

In Moran’s view, imaginative exceptions to these observations included Maslyn Williams’ *New Guinea Patrol* and Shan Benson’s *This is the ABC*, a Listen to Britain-like celebration of the pre-Television Australian Broadcasting Commission, concerned not only with the ABC but also with its audience, the Australian people. However, most observers would concur with Colin Dean’s judgement written from his new post at the recently established ABC TV service:
The Commonwealth Film Unit was in general disarray in the 1950s. There was a lack of funds, a lack of policy, a lack of interest, a lack of co-ordination, lack of anything. Except every now and then an individual would succeed after a fashion in turning out something. But the general climate was antipathetic to government filmmaking, probably of any kind. (in Moran 1991, p. 79)

The Commonwealth Film Unit was not alone in confronting this dilemma. Around the world, as Peter Wintonick's (1999) documentary *Cinema Verite: defining the moment* shows, a new generation of documentary filmmakers were reacting against their perceptions of the restrictive orthodoxy of the classic Griersonian style by developing new techniques and technologies which would allow new forms of documentary production. Even at the CFU in the late 1950s, new sound technology enabling a more flexible approach to recording and editing was producing variations from the house style. Soon the addition of lightweight film cameras with a capacity for sync sound recording would augur in a new wave of filmmaking and a new 'Golden Age' for documentary. (Moran 1991, p. 82). At the same time, Documentary Film, which had hitherto been distributed and exhibited in the cinema either as part of shared bill in the commercial theatres or on specialist non-theatrical circuits, began to negotiate its relationship with a new medium, Television. (O'Regan 1993, p. 71)

**The Sixties and Australian Documentary**

In October 1963 the Vincent Report — the Report from the Senate Select Committee on the Encouragement of Australian Productions for Television commented:

> Perhaps the greatest danger lies in its effect upon the rising generation ... who, day by day, are not only receiving anything but the most inadequate picture of Australia, her national traditions, culture and way of life, but in its place are recipients of a highly coloured and exaggerated picture of the way of life and morals of other countries; mainly the United States of America. (in Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 209-210)

While the Vincent Report was primarily concerned with promoting Australian drama production in the film and television industries, the 1960s would nonetheless witness a remarkable expansion of quality Australian documentary programming on public and
commercial television and a reinvigoration of Commonwealth documentary production. (Moran 1991) Graham Shirley (1983) has suggested that, in part, this was an effect of generational change as largely self-taught cine-literate filmmakers began to access ‘non-professional’ 16mm formats and make films for festival circulation or for new audiences outside the mainstream circuits. Some isolated experimental work had been produced in Australia since the early 1950s and many of these new filmmakers — like Giorgio Mangiamele who made a series of shorts based on migrant problems — came from non-Australian origins. At the same time a number University Film Society members, like Gil Brealey in Melbourne, had begun making experimental and documentary shorts. (Shirley & Adams 1983)

While the Sydney Underground filmmakers grouped around Albie Thoms and Ubu Films were self consciously avant-garde, the Melbourne independents had ‘affinities with those of the British Free Cinema movement ... more concerned with social conscience than personal expression or aesthetic experiment’. In 1964 Nigel Buesst — who would be one of my lecturers at the Swinburne Film School — completed Fun Radio, his satirical look at the Melbourne's ‘young people moving through a summer weekend to the mood set by radio station 3UZ’. That same year, Tom Cowan's prize winning The Dancing Class, observed ballet training with a ‘precise photographic skill’. Shirley regards both films as contributing to an expanded sense of the possibilities for Australian documentary makers. (Shirley & Adams 1983, pp222-227)

The Commonwealth Film Unit in the Sixties

Albert Moran has traced how by 1964 the Commonwealth Film Unit was emerging from the ‘long fifties’ and drawing its second breath. In 1962 the CFU moved to new premises at Lindfield and, with a significantly improved budget, advertised nationally for 22 production assistant positions and begin a slate of new productions which made visible many of the groups marginalised in earlier years. By the end of the decade some of those production assistants — among them Donald Crombie, Arch Nicholson and Peter Weir — would become directors. (Moran 1987)

Moran also records how the CFU began to diversify its aesthetic approach to the documentary. Thus, after making The Aborigines of Australia in 1964, Ian Dunlop was allowed to specialise in ethnographic film and, using cameramen like Dean Semler produced two series, the five hour People of the Australian Western Desert and
the eight hour Towards Baruya Manhood. At the same time, beginning with Bob Kingsbury's One Man's Road (1967) and Stefan Sargent's The Change at Groote (1968), CFU filmmakers began to make works that drew attention to relations between blacks and whites in the city and the country. Commenting on the lack of narration in his film, Bob Kingsbury observed that

if you don't have commentary, if you don't sit down and write it and get it approved, if somebody is giving their opinion, is speaking for themselves, then its no longer a policy thing. (in Moran 1991, p. 102)

John Morris, spoke similarly of Sailor, a portrait of life in the Australian Navy, which he directed in 1968:

We didn't want to do a propaganda film. We wanted to get below deck and show what it was really like. We wanted it to be real. Our using the cinema verite approach was a means out of the Department having the editorial control. We used only synch sound and no commentary. (in Moran 1991, p. 102)

From the Tropics to the Snow (1964), a feature length parody of the process of bureaucratic filmmaking by committee, is generally regarded as the key film demonstrating the CFU's new freedom from official constraints. (Moran 1991, pp. 88-93). Producing two films-within-a-film — one a parody of the CFU's “house style” film ‘full of bland cliché, the other suggesting a new style based on “poetic integrity”’ — the co-directors, Richard Mason and Jack Lee, skewered the pressures to conform with which they were all too familiar. McMurchy (in Murray 1994, pp. 180-181) comments that, viewed in retrospect, this groundbreaking film fails to escape entirely its institutional mission of presenting one more ‘round-up of Australian tourist icons’.

Nor, she suggests, does From the Tropics to the Snow give any hint of the changes going on in the wider society: ‘the birth of “mod” youth culture, Aboriginal “freedom rides” into racist outback towns, lock-outs of miners in Mt Isa’ or the growing dissent over Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam war. These would be the subjects for a new type of documentary production by the television broadcasters.

Documentary Production by Television in the 1960s

As McMurchy observes,
'it was left to the other main arm of government documentary making, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, to begin tackling difficult contemporary subjects and the possibilities of a more spontaneous and candid style of filmmaking. By the mid 1960s, the ABC had begun to develop a counterpart to the exciting television documentaries which had been produced at the BBC by film-makers such as Ken Loach, Peter Watkins and Ken Russell. This new era at the ABC was heralded by Cecil Holmes' I, the Aboriginal (1964), which won the Australian film institute's Gold Award'. (in Murray 1994, p. 181)

That same year the Aboriginal pop star, Jimmy Little, hosted Therese Denny’s A Changing Race, an excellent interview and observation based exploration of shifting indigenous/white relations in Australia. (MacDonald 2001) A year later Gian Carlo Manara’s Living on the Fringe would capture the dilemma of Aborigines coming to the city to look for work only to find unemployment and poverty. While conducting the archival research for The Fair Go I came to appreciate the artistry and integrity of these films and CFU productions such as Bob Kingsbury’s One Man’s Road (1967) and Stefan Sargent’s The Change at Groote (1968). At the same time I was also privileged to be able to draw on the powerful legacy of current affairs documentary which emerged in the 1960s. (Raymond 1999)

McMurchy notes the influence of international developments in public broadcasting and documentary forms:

Working on the BBC model for the weekly Impact time slot, ABC staff documentary makers such as Tom Haydon, John Power, Michel Pearce and Ken Hannam were able to choose their own subjects and work with an unusual degree of freedom to make documentaries examining controversial issues. (in Murray 1994, p. 181)

The newly emerging current affairs programs also regularly contained strong documentary elements. Under Bob Raymond and Michael Charlton, Four Corners regularly put to air challenging quasi-verite treatments of subjects such as the 1966 Federal Election and its attendant anti-conscription protests. Soon the commercial networks were following suit with Bob Raymond’s Project series on Nine, Seven Days on Seven and, eventually, Telescope on Ten. (Raymond 1999; Belby & Lansell 1982, p. 70)
McMurchy recounts how 'in 1967, ABC producer, Tom Manefield, returned from the BBC and persuaded the ABC to undertake a documentary series similar to the BBC's *Man Alive*. The result was the *Chequer-board* series which commenced broadcast in 1969 and, as McMurchy emphasises, broke new ground for Australian documentary and Australian television audiences both in terms of its 'living camera' style, its probing, intrusive close-ups and its broaching of issues such as homosexuality, divorce, poverty, and personal relationships. (in Murray 1994, p. 181)

The end of the Sixties saw "in house" production at all networks embrace wider stylistic and thematic options; strongly influenced by a growing awareness of contemporary developments amongst their international broadcasting peers. This expansion of visual literacy coincided with my own adolescent awareness of and entrenchment by the power of audiovisual communication.

**Other Documentary Developments: Four-Walling Exhibition**

Beattie (2001) has considered another new development from this period: the 'four-walling' of surf movies pioneered by Bob Evans who screened films like *Surf Trek to Hawaii* (1960) and *To Ride a White Horse* (1967) to a new audience away from the cinema mainstream. While George Greenough's *The Coming of the Dawn* (1970), Albert Falzon's *Crystal Voyager* (1973) and Paul Witzig's *Rolling Home* (1974) rode the same wave, other 'four-wellers' worked in the longstanding Francis Birtles-Frank Hurley tradition of travellers' tales. In the mid-1960s these included Keith Adams' *Northern Safari*, the Leyland Brothers *Wheels Across the Wilderness* (1967) and Malcolm Douglas and David Oldmeadow's *Across the Top* (1969). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this genre was quick to find a place in the television schedule. (Beilby & Lansell 1982, p. 48)

Soon, independent documentary producers would employ similar "four-walling" strategies to exhibit films whose subject matter was linked to the interests of burgeoning social movements organised around issues such as the Vietnam war, women's liberation, Aboriginal land rights, gay liberation and other campaigns by other disadvantaged minorities. At the same time, community activists began to screen films on these topics — often sourced from the emerging film co-op movement — in church halls and other non-theatrical venues, as well as cinemas. (Herd 1983)
The Seventies

In 1973, in one of a series of name changes initiated by the new Whitlam Labor Government to downplay British imperial connections and emphasise Australian nationalism, the Commonwealth Film Unit's name was changed to Film Australia. At the same time Film Australia — together with the ABC and the recently established Australian Film Development Corporation — was placed under a new Department of Media as part of the Broadcasting and Film Division. (Dermody & Jacka 1987, pp. 48-71; Moran 1987)

The Labor Government also began a series of other initiatives that would effect documentary production and circulation. The Australia Council for the Arts became the Australia Council and was given an expanded role and more money; and the Experimental Film and Television Fund, established by Prime Minister Gorton in late 1969, became a revamped Film and Television Board with increased funding for low-budget filmmaking, video access centres, filmmakers co-operatives and various cultural organisations. (Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 249-257) Nick Herd has documented how these structures, though originally inspired by interests in avant garde experimental cinema, soon enabled the development of a new wave of documentary production by an emerging generation of political filmmakers concerned with the anti-Vietnam war movement, women's liberation, the Aboriginal land rights movement, gay liberation and campaigns by other disadvantaged minorities. (Herd 1983)

Film Australia in the Seventies

Herd, McMurphy and Moran suggest that with the transition from the post-World War Two era to the 1970s it was no longer possible for Film Australia to assert a single hegemonic vision for the country and its people. The earlier 'totalising mythology of a unified, homogeneous nation' (McMurphy in Murray 1994, p. 182) was now being challenged by young filmmakers imbued with the New Left and 'counter-culture' perspectives of the post-1968 social and political movements.

Prior to the launch of the Australian Film, Television and School (AFTS) in 1973, Film Australia, like the ABC, was one of the few training grounds available to aspiring
documentary-makers. Increasingly, these new arrivals at Lindfield brought with them an urgent sense of social inequity and discrimination which demanded expression in productions exploring different film styles and subjects. Now, films on alcoholism, unemployment, sexuality and migration emerged in styles ranging from an observational approach influenced by direct cinema, to short ‘trigger’ films designed as open-ended discussion starters for educational and community use. In the spirit of the National Film Board of Canada’s Challenge for Change project, films like Peter Weir’s *Whatever Happened to Green Valley?* (1973) drew on the new technology of video port-a-paks. In Weir’s film and in *Access: Experiment in Port Adelaide* (1975) individuals interviewed and recorded on video are later brought back together for a session in which the black and white reel-to-reel 1/2 inch tapes are played back to them to elicit a community response. At the same time, documentary series such as *Our Asian Neighbours* (1971-75) began to look beyond the confines of Australia. (McMurchy in Murray 1994, p. 184)

Significantly, this was also the period in which Film Australia acknowledged the importance of collaborating with television in order to obtain the mass distribution that was once the province of the cinema. During the preparations for Australian television in the early fifties there had been unsuccessful attempts to negotiate a role for the CFU as a provider of content for the national television service. In the early 1960s, a 52 episode anthology series of CFU material, *Australia Today*, screened on the commercial Nine network. By the early 1970s, broadcast was clearly much more important to the unit and it began to transform itself into a production house for television. (Moran 1987)

In 1975 the Labor Government restructured its support for the film and television industries through a new vehicle, the Australian Film Commission (AFC). The AFC included Film Australia, a Project Branch for feature film support, a Marketing Branch and a Creative Development Branch — a ‘ministry for everything else’ which was the successor to the Experimental film and TV Fund. (Dermody & Jacka 1987, p. 84) The benefits of this reorganisation for Film Australia were moot. By the end of the decade, despite a 1977 Oscar awarded to Bruce Petty’s animated documentary essay *Leisure*, staff morale was in decline following budget cuts, the loss of some of its best staff to the expanding feature film industry, and controversies about number of film projects. (Beilby & Lansell 1982, pp. 55-65)
Independent Documentary in Australia

Nick Herd (1983) has sketched the rise of independent filmmaking in Australia in the Seventies, particularly the role of independent documentary production. He and McMurchy suggest that this upsurge was fuelled by the conjunction of more generous film financing policies and a growing body of politicised filmmakers who adopted the documentary form as an effective vehicle for promoting radical and countercultural views. McMurchy records that

Among the first radical independent documentaries to be distributed by the newly established Filmmakers Co-ops were Or Forever Hold Your Peace (Kit Guyatt et al 1970) and Beginnings (Rod bishop et al 1971), both films portraying mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War. (in Murray 1994, p. 189)

These films would soon be joined by other documentaries bearing witness to the position of women, blacks, gays, prisoners and other minorities. (Herd 1983)

In her survey of the Australian documentary in Scott Murray’s edited volume Australian Cinema, McMurchy (1994, p. 192) argues that Alessandro Cavadini’s Ningla A-Na (1972), which documented the setting up of the Tent Embassy calling for indigenous land rights, ‘initiated one of the most important continuing cycles of independent Australian documentaries’. She includes in that cycle films such as Lousy Little Sixpence (1982) in which white filmmakers made films about Aboriginal issues; Protected (1975) and Two Laws (1981) in which white filmmakers collaborated with indigenous communities; and films like My Survival as an Aboriginal (1979) which were initiated and creatively controlled by indigenous filmmakers.

Another cycle of independent documentary identified by McMurchy focused on the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific with films like Denis O'Rourke's Yap, How Did You Know We'd Like TV? (1980), and Bob Connolly and the late Robin Anderson's New Guinea trilogy recording the shift in ‘traditional cultures and economies in the post-colonial era'. McMurchy also emphasises the internationalism of the independent sector evidenced by the likes of David Bradbury's Frontline (1980), Gary Kildea's Celso and Cora (1982) and Solrun Hoass' Green Tea and Cherry Ripe (1987). Other strands of independent documentary recognised the migrant experience; documented contemporary and historical workers’ and residents’ struggles; and
campaign on gay rights, prisoners’ action and environmental issues. There were also more personal, experimental, essay and observational documentary productions including Peter Tammer’s 1982 Journey to the End of the Night. (Herd 1983; McMurchy in Murray 1994)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, McMurchy — who was a key member of the team who produced the landmark feminist compilation documentary For Love or Money (1983) — identifies feminist work as the ‘other major strand of independent documentary since the early 1970s’. The Sydney Women’s Film Group was formed in 1971 and similar groups soon followed in other states. Working with limited budgets these groups' early films, like Film for Discussion (1973), represented the experience of discrimination at home and in the workplace on black-and-white 16mm films which fused the personal and the political and freely blended drama and documentary. Stott (in Blonski 1987, pp. 118-126) has documented how these films resonated with audiences to such an extent that they circulated for over a decade on the distribution circuit developed by the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op which itself became largely a feminist centred organisation.

McMurchy confirms that, for many filmmakers who emerged in this period, the Documentary was a way to express and make visible burning issues, ideas and experiences which all too often ‘had remained suppressed and silent in the mass media’. (in Murray 1994 p189) Accordingly, this growing independent filmmaking community was as concerned with developing alternative forms of distribution and exhibition as it was with production. The Sydney Filmmakers Co-op had started in the late sixties when a group of filmmakers which included Phil Noyce banded together with the aims of distributing and exhibiting their films. They also published a newsletter which became the monthly newspaper, Filmnews. Until it folded in 1985, the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op played a central role in the development and distribution of independent documentary. Importantly it nurtured an audience and a means of non-theatrical distribution of independent documentary films in a period when few independent documentary filmmakers could hope to see their work sold to and broadcast on television. (Herd 1983; Hodsdon 2001; Shirley & Adams 1983)

Commercial Documentary Production

Beilby and Lansell (1982) remind us that the strand of documentary production with
the strongest claim to continuity in the Australian industry is the commercial sector. By the late 1970s there were over 500 commercial producers and production houses operating across Australia producing training films, sponsored shorts, PR films and Information films of various kinds. In part this process was helped by the development of state funded film institutions in South Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania all of which included a brief to support local documentary producers. (Brown 1987, pp. 7-17) A number of ‘independent’ producers also developed a footprint in this sector and some of these documentary producers managed to sell documentary programs to commercial television. Unsurprisingly, the travelogue genre typified by the Leyland Brothers series was the most common of these sales, but, from time to time, more challenging programs managed to get to air. For example, in 1970 Frank Heimans and Douglas Baglin sold to Channel Seven their feature length documentary What Have They Done to My Country? as a bi-centenary program. (Beilby & Lansell 1982, pp. 70-78) But such sales remained the exception until the late 1980s when the funding arrangements examined in the following chapter set out to forge a nexus between the independent production sector and the broadcasters.

Conclusion

The principal aim of this chapter has not been to produce a nostalgic, celebratory survey of Australian documentary production from 1896 to 1988. Rather its goal has been to demonstrate the various purposes for and ways in which Australian documentary makers have borne witness to, documented, analysed and preserved the myriad facets of experience, memory and personality which have made up Australia’s distinctive and developing national culture. It has also aimed to enable a consideration of the institutional relation of the submitted works to that earlier production

The chapter shows how, throughout the years surveyed, Australian documentary production has met the immediate aims of its sponsors by profiling Australian products, culture, and society locally and internationally. At the same time, that production has generated a store of archival materials able to be drawn on to offer subsequent generations a window onto their nation’s past and the attitudes and issues that have formed us.

Importantly, this rich documentary tradition was underwritten by the preparedness of state and
federal governments of various political persuasions — together with major public institutions and private corporations — to develop mechanisms that maintained the continuity of Australian documentary production. In turn, while meeting their immediate commercial, political or promotional purposes, the documentaries have also promoted a national and international appreciation of the variety of our landscape, culture and people and challenged crude stereotypes and clichés of what it might mean to be Australian.

In creating its representation of key moments or figures in Australian political and social history, each of the submitted documentaries has negotiated this significant legacy. In tandem with a viewing of the submitted films, the chapter therefore positions the reader/viewer to appreciate the institutional relation of the submitted films to the archival provenance from which they draw. One observation might be that, just as for the bulk of the eighty years or so of Australian documentary production surveyed in this chapter, each of the submitted films has won support not through a calculation of the individual program’s market profitability but from a wider recognition of the documentary form’s capacity to communicate important information in an engaging way to targeted communities.

Throughout this period, documentary production — by dint of its comparative economy, opportunity for creativity, and capacity for witness — was viewed as being uniquely placed to provide both immediate and long-term economic, social and cultural benefits. That is to say, as Franco Papandrea has demonstrated, for ‘benefits, such as the enhancement of a national culture, that may be generated as a market externality’. (BTCE 1997, p. 66) In the years under survey Australians were not willing to allow such crucial activities as national image making to be placed solely in private hands. As the late Tom Haydon put it in 1984,

In the long run the only reason for the Australian public either through tax concessions or a Film Commission, to back film as against, say, dry cleaning or hairdressing, is that it’s going to have some perceived cultural value for the country. (in Fiske & McRae 1984)

However, while the production of the submitted documentary films has benefited from Australia’s diverse documentary legacy (as well as from the smaller store of Australian fictional films) and shares with that legacy the character of a Public Good, each film has at the same time, had to negotiate the changed circumstances marked by the dominance of television and the growing authority of the rhetoric of the global market economy.
The nature of those changes and their impacts is considered in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR
Australian Television’s Engagement with Australian Documentary 1980-2005
Considered as the Context for the Development of the Submitted Works.

Each of the submitted works has been produced in the period of a negotiated production investment and funding ‘Accord’ between the Film Finance Corporation, public (and, much less frequently commercial) broadcasters, State film agencies and the independent production sector. My experience completing the submitted films has provided a key opportunity for primary research into the impact of these prevailing industry and policy settings from 1988 to 2005.

That research has been supplemented by work on two other projects. The first was the experience researching and co-editing the policy paper, State of the Art/Art of the State, commissioned by the Australian Film Commission for the 1997 Australian International Documentary Conference. That report was prepared in collaboration with the late Ian Stocks and my Griffith Film School colleague, Trish FitzSimons. The second (and ongoing) project is a Contemporary History of Australia Documentary. In 2000 Trish FitzSimons, Dr Dugald Williamson and I outlined the aims of this collaborative investigation in an eponymous article in Metro. Considering the literature on the Australian Documentary after 1988, we noted that

Turning to our later period, in some ways documentary remains the ‘poor relation’ of the feature film that it was earlier, ‘worthy of attention, but not to the degree accorded mass-market entertainment’.

Despite this discrepancy, it must be said that there is some documentation of the convergence between institutional and independent filmmaking and the new relations between documentary forms and production contexts. A discussion paper by Murray Brown from the Australian Content Inquiry is a useful record of issues in documentary production and dissemination from the beginning of our period of study. In a 1996 paper, Franco Papandrea provides a statistical framework that helps to situate documentary developments within the broad context of television production. Reference is made to documentary as it is informed by complex industrial and cultural factors in Tom O’Regan’s Australian National Cinema. Political and economic issues affecting media practices including documentary have been debated in relation to
ethnographic and intercultural film-making and the politics of indigenous representation. Books have been generated by documentaries directed by filmmakers such as Dennis O'Rourke and Trevor Graham. And some recent books on Australian media include work by or about documentary filmmakers and key institutional players in the documentary field.

Among media magazines and journals, *Metro* and *Australian Screen Education* (formerly *Metro Education*) have sustained an interest in documentary. *Metro* has published papers from the Australian International Documentary Conferences covering diverse issues. In 1999, it introduced a documentary review section. In 1996, *Media International Australia* devoted an issue to documentary, covering questions of globalisation, television programming and audience response. But in that issue Australian documentary was a main focus in only two articles. *Continuum* published an issue on documentary but it contained only one substantial example of Australian documentary practice.

This scan of the institutional and critical literature on recent documentary suggests that it deals with significant pockets of activity but does not systematically map the wider developments in the new documentary domain in Australia. (FitzSimons et al 2000)

While the following account of the interaction of Australian Television and the documentary production sector does not pretend to remedy this lack of a systematic mapping, it is informed by my production experiences, the collaborations noted above, and, of course, a survey of the available literature.

**Introduction**

By 1980, as Trish FitzSimons (2002) makes clear in her article 'Accords, slates, slots, strands and series: Australian television takes on independent documentary', there were four distinct contributors to Australian documentary production: Film Australia, the ABC, the independent sector and the commercial production houses. As the decade progressed, adjustments to the mechanisms for government support and funding of the film and television industry began to diminish the barriers between these sectors. By 1988, with the formation of the Australian Film Finance Corporation, the streams of 'independent' and 'institutional' production and distribution converged and television
became the decisive outlet for independent documentary. (FitzSimons et al 2000)

This convergence may be seen as an extension of the historical processes outlined in the preceding chapter. That chapter sketched the development in Australia of documentary forms designed for state, commercial and community institutions as a way to document, analyse and disseminate opinion about social, scientific and cultural events of ongoing significance. In seeking to accomplish those ends, documentary makers were required to engage with a wide range of social sectors and frequently their negotiation of cultural, technological and policy shifts posed as critical a challenge as production itself.

As we have seen, until the 1960's documentary film predominantly reached its audience through a mix of theatrical and non-theatrical exhibition. (Rosenthal 1971) Then, developments in technology — particularly the advent of video and the emerging dominance of television as a means of distribution and exhibition — began to alter production formats, funding patterns and audiences. By the early 1990s the primary window and commissioner for documentary in Australia was broadcast television. However this shift was achieved only after concerted lobbying which culminated in the development of an 'Accord' between the Australian Film Finance Corporation, broadcasters, state film agencies and the independent sector. (FitzSimons et al 2003; Maddox 1996)

Each of the submitted documentary works was produced under these 'Accord' arrangements. The 'Accord' offered the prospect of enabling independent voices to reach a new mass audience, the television viewer, and required in return the developing engagement of the independent documentary production community with the industrial world of broadcast television. A sense of this is captured in the title given by the ABC to a forerunner of the Accord which was launched at the 1987 Documentary Conference; the scheme was termed the Australian Independent Documentary Initiative (IDI). (Yule 1993, p. 86)

The Backstory of Australian Television and the Documentary

Broadcast television started in Australia in 1956 with the beginnings of what would become the national network of the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and the Seven and Nine commercial networks. A third commercial network, which would become the Ten network, began in 1964-65. A second
Commonwealth government-funded broadcaster, the multicultural Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), started in 1980. (O’Regan 1993; ABT 1988, pp. 207-223)

During the first two decades of transmission, there was a comparative scarcity of documentary on both public and commercial Australian television. To a considerable extent this paucity of broadcast documentary reflected the fact that until the 1970s Film Australia, the government organisation that was at the time the major producer of documentaries in the country, opted predominantly not to disseminate its work through television exhibition. Instead, much of Film Australia’s production continued to be exhibited in schools and other non-theatrical circuits. As noted in the preceding chapter, this institutional mode of production and circulation had operated at Film Australia since at least the 1940s, and can be understood as falling within the first of John Corner’s categories for documentary production, the project of ‘democratic civics’, and nation building. (Moran 1991, p. 56; Brown 1987)

During these years the national broadcaster, the ABC, concentrated on non-fictional programming (‘features’) marked by series formats, journalistic modes of production and scant traces of individual authorship. Unsurprisingly, this institutional production meets the definition of Corner’s category of journalistic inquiry and exposition. In the same period, commercial free to air television produced a corresponding range of in-house current affairs series and ‘features’ and there was a regular flow of personnel and formats between the public and commercial sectors in these years. (Raymond 1999; Beilby & Lansell 1982, pp. 70-79, 146-154)

As FitzSimons, Williamson and Laughren (2000) have noted elsewhere, from the early 1970s, and largely to one side of these institutional government and commercial settings, an independent documentary sector had developed in Australia. By the early 1980s this sector — which may be understood as conforming to Corner’s category of radical interrogation and alternative perspective — had attained international recognition for its authored, often political, one-off documentary productions. (Treole 1982)

The bulk of the work of this independent sector was supported either through direct government subsidy from the Australian Film Commission (AFC) — an agency of the Australian Government for film and related media development — or through indirect government subsidy from tax concessions to private investors in film and television productions. Initially, these independent works were produced mainly on 16 millimetre
film, and presented to limited audiences theatrically, via festivals and small-scale cinema release, and non-theatrically, through filmmakers' co-operatives, clubs and educational organisations. While 'Independent' is a term which eludes simple definition, here the term 'independent' means a freelance filmmaker not on the regular payroll of any media industry institution. (Herd 1983; FitzSimons 2002)

In the 1980s the size of the independent sector grew significantly in response to higher levels of direct subsidy and more generous tax concessions to investors in film production. However, since filmmakers were not required to have guaranteed distribution or broadcast arrangements in place as a precondition for production funding, little of this independent work reached the broadcast television audience. Despite a successful cinema release occasionally persuading a broadcaster to purchase a film after its completion, the lack of 'broadcast visibility' for the bulk of independent documentary frustrated both the freelance film community and the governments who funded this 'independent' production.

The limited purchase and transmission of independent documentary was also a product of the lack of documentary timeslots across the broadcast spectrum. While the ABC commenced the documentary series Chequerboard and A Big Country at the end of the 1960s, the commercial networks did not established regular documentary slots until late in the 1970s. Until then, with the exception of the Leyland Brothers series on Nine, there was the occasional 'one-off' travel or wildlife program purchased from producers such as Bob Raymond, or rare 'specials' made in-house by the news department. (Brown 1987, pp. 7-15; Beilby 1981, pp. 90-109)

This comparative lack of documentary on commercial free to air television has continued up to the present. By way of explanation, commercial television programmers have routinely argued that the unpredictability and idiosyncrasy of the independent documentary production schedule poses a problem for a commercial broadcasting environment where stability of ratings in a particular timeslot is vital to the ability to make a profit from the sector's primary marketable commodity: the ability to deliver audiences to advertisers. (Brown 1987, p. 13)

The ABCs growing acceptance of program ratings as a key performance indicator meant that the public broadcaster’s programmers often echoed their commercial counterparts when justifying the exclusion of independent documentary from a regular place in the
ABC schedule. For its part, from 1980 the then recently established second public broadcaster, the SBS, did broadcast a certain amount of independent work. However, for most of the 1980s SBS was in no financial position either to purchase or commission substantial documentary production.

As FitzSimons (2002) has demonstrated, from the early 1980s, the gap between the institutional sector — Film Australia, the ABC, the SBS and the commercial networks — and the independent documentary sector was becoming unsustainable. In response, in 1984 the Australian Film Commission developed a Documentary Fellowship scheme which marked a move away from the non-theatrical circuit and towards television as the major distribution and exhibition vehicle for independent documentaries. This Documentary Fellowship scheme brought together an established independent documentary filmmaker, a generous ABC pre-sale which ensured broadcast, and a guarantee of AFC funding. Importantly, the initial Fellowship productions were constituted as free from supervision or control of either subject matter or form. This Janus-faced scheme represented the zenith of the older system of government funding — focused as it was on one-off documentaries with an emphasis on formal innovation — while at the same time being the precursor of broadcast oriented production, since the ABC was involved from the beginning and an eventual television screening was guaranteed. (Hughes 1998)

**Independent Documentary and the Television Market**

In 1978 a review of the AFC had declared that it was ‘in the money business not the movie business’ and recommended that the AFC adopt a more a more commercial orientation and a more industry-like organisation. At the same time the Fraser Coalition Government initiated a change to Australia’s tax regime — the 10BA tax concessions — designed to promote private sector investment in the film and television industry in line with a market rather than a government led agenda. By 1981 these changes were in place and — together with continuing cuts to the Film Australia budget — they provided the framework for documentary as well as feature film production until the establishment of the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1988. (Dermody & Jacka 1987, pp. 96-107)

By the late seventies a small number of Australian independent documentary producers including Denis O'Rourke, David Bradbury and Chris Noonan had begun to
break through the barriers keeping their work off the small screen. This new breed of creative and professional documentarists was serious about seeking release of their work through television but found themselves selling (and sometimes pre-selling) their documentaries to appreciative overseas networks such as the BBC and American PBS while still being unable to make a sale to television in Australia. One of the first to overcome the indifference of Australian TV to independent Australian documentary was Tom Haydon whose *The Last Tasmanian* sold to Network Ten for a proper market price in 1978. The following year Brian Morris sold *Mutiny on the Western Front* to Seven and shortly thereafter Peter Luck and David Salter launched the first Australian independently produced serious documentary series, *This Fabulous Century*. (Beilby & Lansell 1982, pp. 148-153)

With the 10BA tax concessions in place to encourage private investment it appeared that the Australian independent documentary was on the verge of commercial viability. 'A major remaining obstacle was the attitude of the local public and commercial networks. In 1981 Brian Davies speculated that the 'commercial channels were reluctant to schedule documentaries without a permanent source of them and without the confidence the audience really wanted them'. (in Brown 1987, p. 7) One stark measure of the place of documentary in the broadcast schedule in these years is the fact that until 1987/88 the term 'documentary' did not appear as a separate category in the annual reports of the industry regulator, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. Indeed not until 1996 would documentary have its own specific domestic first release content quota for commercial television. (Laughren in FitzSimons et al 1997, p. 31) Instead, under the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal 'documentary' was subsumed by an Information category defined as 'programs of a descriptive type, concerning agriculture, industry, travel, nature and science etc., also historical and biographical programs'. (Beilby 1981, p. 94) These well established categories are of course all too familiar from the history canvassed in the preceding chapter. In these years 'Documentary' also qualified in the big-budget special category and of the 119 specials telecast between 1980 and 1986, 22 (18%) were classified as documentaries. However, the record shows that these 'documentaries' included *Ita Buttrose's Royal Wedding Special* and the 2000th episode of *The Mike Walsh Show*. (Brown 1987, pp. 2-27)

The data compiled by Murray Brown for the 1987 Australian Content Inquiry Discussion Paper *Australian Documentary Programs* traces the rating's performance, scheduling, incidence and topics of Australian documentaries shown between 1980-
1986. The total number shown annually fluctuated greatly, often depending on the year of series screenings (eg in Melbourne from 15 in 1981 to 78 in 1984); over 62% were screened on weekends (though TEN in Sydney showed only one on a weekend in that period); and of the 522 listed 338 (65%) concerned nature and travel. In the years Brown studied, documentary ratings peaked at 40 for Mike Willesee’s prime time weekend specials on Seven. These averaged a rating of 22 and were exceptions in that they explored social and human themes. Willesee’s success continued on weeknights on Nine; averaging 27 and regularly winning the ratings. However, the networks chose not to persist with human interest documentaries preferring to win early evening weekend slots with wildlife, travel and adventure programs in Our World or World Around Us packages book-ended by personality presenters such as John Laws and Ita Buttrose.

Murray Brown reported that the commercial networks’ need to maximise and sell audience share meant that they found the one-off Australian documentary from independent producers difficult to place in a prime-time schedule, costly to promote, and too often directed at an

‘educated, ideas oriented, artistically sensitive audience’ whereas the networks seek to increase their share of the mass market [or at least] to maintain ratings by not confronting its audiences with program content or scheduling which the networks believe will not be readily accepted. (Brown 1987, p. 25)

(Such a mindset suggests some difficulty in winning access to the commercial TV airwaves for the types of documentary program submitted with this statement.)

Some of the concerns of the period are caught in this exchange between panel and floor at the 1987 The Price of Being Australian Conference sponsored by the ABT:

Nick Torrens: (SPAA) I think there is an area that has been referred to a couple of times but not really dealt with and that is documentary filmmaking. For me, the careful evaluation of what’s actually going on at the time is the basis of Australianness.

Over the past few years documentaries have fallen to a place in commercial television where they make up less than one percent of overall programming.
These are usually nature and adventure types of documentary rather than any of those which deal with or explore the human or social context. Could I ask the panel if they consider the Australian documentary has a larger place in the Australianness of future programming and, if so, will it in fact need a quota system, like dramas, to enable Australian audiences to create their own demand for it?

Ian Gow: (Managing Director, TEN)

I have always believed that most of the arguments about Australian production are very much biased in favour of drama ... If we must have a quota I don’t see why it should be all drama’s way. The documentary producer is in a predicament that is not just Australian, however. If you are a distributor from anywhere in the world and you go to the American stations with a bag full of documentaries, you’ll get shown the door. It’s very awkward.

Documentaries aren’t in vogue at the moment; they probably will come back in vogue in a few years time and all three channels will have them again. I agree that they make a very important contribution, and that you are a bit unfairly treated in the argument. I think most programmers are relatively lukewarm about documentaries in terms of ratings. [ABT 1988, pp. 141-142]

While the ABC regularly screened a greater proportion of documentary work than its commercial rivals, until the late 1980s it was — despite its collaboration with the Australian Film Commission in the development of a Documentary Fellowship scheme — no less resistant to approaches from independent producers. (Brown 1987, p. 25)

The AFC and Documentary in the Eighties

From its inception in 1975 the AFC had been involved in supporting documentary development and production. Paradoxically though, the Creative Development Branch, which was a key source of funds for films like Tom Zubrycki’s Waterloo (1981) and For Love or Money (McMurchy et al 1983), did not recognise ‘documentary’ as a separate genre. The Branch was in fact opposed to supporting documentaries which were ‘traditional’ in style or which seemed to be a substitute for
production at established institutions such as Film Australia or the ABC. On the other hand the more mainstream Project Development Branch recognised the genre but insisted that producers requesting funding must demonstrate that the film had been pre-sold to local or overseas television. (Dermody & Jacka 1987, pp. 72-107)

In light of this cleavage, the Documentary Fellowship Scheme established in 1984 might be understood as an attempt to combine these two approaches by awarding established documentary producers, with a proven commitment to excellence and innovation, project funding on the basis of track record rather than a specific documentary proposal. These Fellows were to receive $75000 each plus an assignment of 50% equity in the completed production. At the same time the ABC guaranteed to telecast the completed film at a purchase price of $50000. (Hughes 1998)

Inevitably tensions and disagreements arose as independent documentary makers struggled to come to terms with the duration of the available broadcasting slots and prime time audience expectations. But with the closure of alternatives like the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op, this scheme was a harbinger of the co-dependency which would soon categorise the relationship between the independent sector and the more institutional arms of documentary production and circulation. By 1987 the status of one of those institutional arms, Film Australia, was itself under review. (Moran 1991)

Film Australia in the Eighties

As Moran (1987) notes, despite some new initiatives such as the establishment of a Women's Film Unit in 1984, the 1980s proved to be difficult years for Film Australia. By early 1987 it faced the prospect of a full review of its operations, organisation and viability by the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Environment. (McMurchy in Murray 1994, p. 185; Blonski et al 1987)

Staff ceilings had been introduced in 1977 and from 1981 to 1985 staff numbers at Film Australia dropped from 150 to 83. In part, this decline reflected the growing tendency to 'contract out' or 'outsource' work that traditionally had been undertaken by full time staff. To some extent, the erosion of staff and output was slowed by a set of counter measures which included increased television sales, more co-productions and the use of the 10BA tax incentive to encourage private investment in Film
Australia's productions. At the same time, like the independent documentary makers whom it increasingly employed, Film Australia now turned to television sales as a means of offsetting rising production costs and securing substantial audiences. While establishing ties with both the ABC and commercial broadcasters, Film Australia also generated large-scale international documentary series with overseas broadcasters and other national film organisations. (Moran 1991, pp. 104-132)

In mid-1987 the result of the Federal Government inquiry into Film Australia was handed down. Film Australia was to be established as an autonomous, government owned business with the promise of the capacity to steer the organisation in self-determined directions. However the exercise of this relative autonomy would be constrained by the need for increasingly careful negotiation with the world of broadcast television.

1988 and All That: the Impact of the Australian Film Finance Corporation

By 1988 the developments were in place that would decisively shape the interactions between independent filmmakers and television. (FitzSimons et al 2000) The most important change was the establishment that year of a new Australian Commonwealth Government production assistance agency, the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC). (Maddox 1996)

Concerned with its inability to cap the cost of the 10BA tax incentive scheme the Federal Government opted to develop the Film Finance Corporation as the Australian Government's principal agency for funding the production of film and television in Australia. [AFC 1987] The FFC was constituted as a wholly owned government company designed to support film and television production to ensure Australians the opportunity to make and watch their own screen stories.

In order to support diversity, the FFC funds were directed to the most expensive program formats: feature films, mini-series, telemovies and documentaries. It was argued that cheaper formats such as current affairs, serial drama and 'infotainment' were able to be fully financed by the market, whereas the more expensive formats would in many cases not be made without government assistance. Under this rationale a proportion of the FFC budget was earmarked for documentary. (Maddox 1996)
FitzSimons (2002) has documented how from the outset the ABC was a key participant in the new funding arrangements for independent documentary production set up by the FPC scheme. Crucially, the national broadcaster was concurrently undergoing a shift from an in-house model — where documentary production was predominantly undertaken by the ABC's permanent staff — to an outsourced, more contract based model of production. By this time the SBS had also achieved sufficient additional federal funding to enable it to begin commissioning some documentary work from the independent sector.

In line with the recommendations of its review, the Australian government production agency, Film Australia, was corporatised and began to place a much greater emphasis on pre-sales and co-productions with local broadcasters, and to develop structures enabling it to work with independent producers. (Brown 1987, p. 27)

A related development was the establishment of the National (now International) Documentary Conference, which was first held in Adelaide in late 1987. In keeping with other developments, the years since that initial conference have seen the event move towards being at least as much a Market as a Conference. Thus the “Introduction” on the website of the 2006 conference asserts that

> the AIDC offers extensive marketplace opportunities for all delegates. For producers seeking finance for projects, there are a number of pitching opportunities over the four days, including DOCUmart, Pitch and Pints, Matchmaking Rendezvous as well as the many informal and formal meetings you can organise during the conference. (http://2006.aidc.com.au)

Inevitably, most of this ‘matchmaking’ involves getting into bed with at least one broadcaster.

**The Coming of the Broadcasters**

Trish FitzSimons’ (2002) article “Accords, slates, slots, strands and series: Australian television takes on independent documentary” shows how since 1988 almost all of the government funding bodies in the country have required documentary projects to have in place a ‘pre-sale’ with a broadcaster as a precondition for receiving development or production support. Unsurprisingly therefore, since each of the submitted documentaries
has been developed and produced after 1988, their production history has been inescapably marked by the Accord: the bureaucratic and legal structures and processes developed to manage the intersection of television commissioning and programming, independent documentary filmmaking and government film funding practices.

Pre-sales and Commissioning Editors

FitzSimons notes that while some forms of ‘[p]re-sale had existed in Australia from at least the early 1980s they were generally deployed in an idiosyncratic and ad hoc fashion’. Mark Hamlyn, the ABC Commissioning Editor for The Legend of Fred Paterson, recalls that when the ABC’s Documentary Unit was set up in 1988 there was no simple way of discovering either which pre-sale agreements had been entered into by the network or what stage those projects had reached. (FitzSimons 2002, pp. 175-180) Two of ABC Documentary Unit’s first initiatives were to secure a dedicated pre-sale budget and to create the institutional role of Executive Producer. Harry Bardwell, who was the inaugural appointee to this position and the EP of Red Ted and the Great Depression, was charged with working with the independent documentary community to pre-purchase documentaries and oversee their subsequent production.

Hamlyn describes the ABC bureaucratic structures at that stage as: ‘a prototype ... it was a model, it was a machine, purpose built to integrate with other funding agencies as they were beginning to evolve’. (in FitzSimons 2002, p. 175) In time, Bardwell's Executive Producer position came to be described as Commissioning Editor, and was in many ways, including its title, explicitly modelled on the structures of the UK’s Channel 4. The key function of the commissioning editor was to ensure that ‘the network is able to establish a closer relationship with the producer and to ensure that the project will meet its programming requirements’. (Brown 1987, p. 16)

FitzSimons (2002, p. 176) identifies the tensions that accompanied this shift:

For a documentary film making community that had agitated for television broadcast and indeed pre-sales for their work for many years, the realities of interaction with a commissioning editor and broadcaster were not always comfortable.

She emphasises the contingent nature of the negotiations and notes that ‘[t]he pages of Filmnews of the late 1980s are full of discussion of these tensions’, with many
independent documentary makers arguing that at least some documentaries should continue be made without having to conform to the market pressures of television. By the close of the 1980s, ‘individual productions still had pre-sale deals negotiated on a case-by-case basis, in a sometimes painful and protracted process’. (FitzSimons 2002, p. 178)

By the mid 1990s however the role of the commissioning editor was increasingly regularised as cross-institutional associations between broadcasters and Federal and State funding agencies were structured in such a way as to bring projects to a broadcast timed fruition.

The Formalising of Accord (and non-Accord) Production

The first of the formal Accords between the FFC and broadcasters was established in the financial year 1991/92. (Noakes 1993, p. 115) Originally proposed as a structure to regularize pre-sale agreements cross the industry and hence initially offered to all broadcasters, the Accords were signed by the public broadcasters, the ABC and the SBS, and a sole commercial free to air network, Channel Seven. However, since the regulatory regime under which the free to air commercial channels operate has yet to include a distinct quota for independently produced documentary material, the Accord has not proved to be a consistently attractive option for Channel Seven and this initial agreement has regularly lapsed. (FitzSimons 2002)

David Noakes has suggested that the Accords were implemented because they provided a measure of certainty for all parties. The Accord meant that an agreed number of documentaries was to be produced each year from a pool of proposals generated through a publicly advertised application ‘round’. These Accord projects were attractive to the networks because they required a smaller percentage pre-sale from a broadcaster than was otherwise required to trigger FFC investment funding. Importantly, eligibility for consideration as an Accord project meant that it had to meet the criterion of being “of cultural relevance to Australia”. (Noakes 1993, pp. 117-119)

As FitzSimons argues, for the broadcasters the Accords ensured that the commissioning editors’ budgets went further while also assisting them to develop and tailor their ‘slate’ of the subsequent year’s documentary production to their network’s overall programming schedule. For the documentary filmmakers, the Accords provided a measure of
predictability as to budget and a sense of a guaranteed minimum amount of product which would be commissioned by the broadcasters in a given period. Perhaps most significantly, the Accord provided ‘a continued capacity to initiate documentary projects ideas on a “one off” basis, particularly projects of specific interest to an Australian rather than an international audience’. (FitzSimons 2002, p. 176) By the second year of their operation in 1992-93, 75% of the FFC’s documentary funds were committed to Accord projects, most of which were seen exclusively on Australian television, without further distribution to cinema or overseas broadcasters. (Noakes 1993, p. 119)

It was under the terms of this Accord process that both Red Ted and the Great Depression and The Legend of Fred Paterson were able to achieve production.

Unsurprisingly, the financial recoupment to the FFC from such culturally specific Accord documentaries proved to be substantially lower than the returns from projects designed for international distribution, the so called ‘Non-Accord’ projects. In order to trigger FFC funding these ‘Non-Accord’ projects — which were not required to meet the conditions of cultural relevance to Australia or the Accord’s strict budget cap — needed a higher level of pre-sale including overseas market interest. They also had higher budgets and, as FitzSimons (2002) emphasises, the conditions of their financing fostered an important new element in the Australian industry, the specialist documentary producer with a ‘slate’ of projects.

Production Slates

FitzSimons makes the point that the specialist documentary producer was a rare figure in the independent documentary sector of the 1970s to late 1980s. Instead, the production/direction roles tended to be combined — often with more than one person sharing this hybrid role. In this more artisan model of documentary production, filmmakers tended to work on only one project at a time and generally for a period over more than one year. (FitzSimons 2002, p. 176)

Her account certainly resonates with my own experience working on independent films in those years. For example, in the case of Exits I was part of a creative ‘troika’ which functioned as a collective involved in production, direction and postproduction; on Munda Nyingu I worked as an editor with a producer/director duo who shared those roles with the Fringedwellers of the Western Australian goldfields; and on The Road: Voices from Prison I worked as a researcher/editor with a solo producer/director in
dialogue with the Prisoners Action Group. In the case of Ngukurr: Weya Wi Na I was the editor/facilitator of a project without any individually named director which was developed under the collective control of the indigenous community at Ngukurr on the Roper River in the Northern territory. (Morris 1998, pp. 26-28)

As FitzSimons suggests, the initiation of the Accords and their increasingly complex ‘deals’ and associated legal and financial requirements made such arrangements increasingly unlikely and contributed to the emergence of the specialist documentary producer and a more industrial model of production. These changes were also connected to the increasing globalisation of the international documentary market and the development of larger documentary production companies who increasingly maintained a slate of different projects in various states of development. FitzSimons suggests that an index of this shift is that the AFC and the State film agencies began to fund producers to take their slates of projects to international markets. (2002, p. 176)

Arguably, this emergence of producers and their slates of projects was part of a trend away from independent documentary production being sustained by a commitment to produce a Public Good and towards the independent documentary being considered as simply another tele-visual industrial commodity. In this new model, documentary works became ‘products,’ created for the ‘markets’ and the business plans of production companies were at least as important a set of documents as project treatments.

With the move to this form of production the specific programming schedule used by television took on an ever more decisive role as documentary makers shaped their projects to meet the ‘slots’ available in the television program. And, increasingly, as my own experiences can attest, the completed documentaries represented an outcome negotiated between the producer, director, commissioning editor and/or executive producer.

Program Slots

The concept of the (time) slot had been well established in Australian commercial television since its inception. A particular time slot — sometimes further unified by a presenter — provided a way of grouping similar works together with a view to gathering a loyal repeat audience and thereby offering certainty to potential advertisers. Without the constraints of the expectations of advertisers (and, to an extent, of ratings) public
broadcasters were slower to move to the ‘slot’ as a consistent way to program material. (O’Regan 1993; Brown 1987; Turner & Cunningham 2000). FitzSimons (2002, p. 177) suggests that ‘[a]s slots first developed on Australian public television they provided a way for television executives and programmers to group together works under a particular heading or title, with or without a presenter’.

Such slots could also include completed material individually purchased or pre-purchased from Australia and overseas, as well as material produced in-house. For example, in 1987 Munda Nyringu, a film which I had edited in 1983 for the Fringe Dwellers of the Western Australian goldfields and which was distributed non-theatrically by the Australian Film Institute, was included in the series The First Australians as part of ABC programming put to air in the lead up to the Bicentennial year.

FitzSimons (2002 p. 177) observes that when independent documentary in Australia was primarily a theatrical and non-theatrical medium, documentary lengths tended to vary widely, with the length of each film seen as an outgrowth of form and content, and part of the documentary film-maker’s artistic licence. (Stott & McMurchy 1988) Certainly, as late as 1987 when I was cutting the AFC supported documentary, The Road: Voices from Prison for director Kerry O’Rourke and the Prisoners Action Group, at no time was it suggested that we consider matching its duration to a ‘TV hour’. In the rare instances when such independent films were televised, they were almost always individually marketed and scheduled. But with the developing centrality of television, the dictates of the overall broadcast schedule began to have a powerful impact on the forms and duration available to independent documentary. Over time, the slot concept has been refined to mean a standard starting time, length, style and broad category of content. (FitzSimons 2002; Hartley 1999)

Each of the programs submitted for this PhD reflects a differing encounter with the program schedule of the ABC. In 1994, Red Ted and the Great Depression screened as a stand alone 57 minute Wednesday Night Special in the prime time 8.30pm slot. In 1996, The Legend of Fred Paterson was hurriedly re-cut from 57 to a broadcast version of 55 minutes to meet the suddenly altered requirements of the presented View from Home 9.30 pm Thursday slot. In 1999, The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum was allowed to go to air at 57 minutes in the prime time 8.30 Inside Story slot despite the standard duration for that slot being a ‘maximum’ 55 minutes. To date, Stories from the Split: the Struggle for the Souls of Australian Workers is yet to find its place in the broadcast
schedule.

**Programming Strands**

FitzSimons (2002) has pointed out that that alongside such ‘Television Hour’ Slots — which may vary in program length from 46 minutes for commercial broadcasters to 51 minutes for the SBS and 55 minutes for the ABC — there also has emerged the half hour ‘Strand’. The production of these ‘Strands’ often called for producers and broadcasters to draw on a more diverse range of funding sources than the narrow grid of film and television institutions. One of the first of these themed strands was the *Australian Mosaic* series, broadcast by SBS across 26 weeks in 1989. Tellingly, much of the budget for this series came from government cultural bodies outside broadcasting, such as the Office for Multicultural Affairs and the Australia Council (the Federal Government’s peak arts support organization). (O’Regan 1993, p. 161) In the years since 1994, SBS Independent (SBSI) — a division of SBS Television established in October 1994 by the Keating Labor Commonwealth Government as part of its *Creative Nation* cultural policy statement and subsequently given ongoing funding by the Howard Coalition government — has further refined this capacity to access a wider range of funding sources.

*The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum*, while a TV hour in duration, is an example of production supported by a variety of film and non-film agencies. Apart from its ABC pre-sale (which was offered as ‘in kind’ archival rights rather than cash) key funding for the documentary was provided by support in *Creative Nation* for the wider Discovering Democracy project developed through Open Learning Australia. The documentary itself was one of a range of outcomes from the Discovering Democracy project (others included an ABC Radio National series, and print curriculum materials for primary and secondary schools). (Williamson 2004, pp.61-65)

**Australian Documentary and the Regulation of Australian Broadcast Television**

In the analogue era, in Australia as in many other nations, there has been an expectation that, in return for privileged access to the publicly owned and scarce broadcast spectrum, licensed TV operators have a duty of trust to supply programs which serve the public interest. (Moran 1993; Papandrea 1997) Thus Section 3e of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* stated that one of the objectives of the act was ‘to promote the role of broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of national identity’. This
demonstrates that the Government’s role in the media is not limited merely to the provision of targeted production funding but also includes media regulation. Such regulation has been part of the licensing obligations of Australian commercial broadcasters since 1961. And while the public broadcasters, the ABC and the SBS, have not been subject to the same commercial regulatory regime, each has had to observe the terms of its respective Charter of Performance legislated by the Federal Parliament.

In the period considered in this chapter the Australian Content Standard of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) and its successor the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA), aimed to support ‘the community’s continued access to television programs produced under Australian creative control’. At the time of writing, Australia retains not only a mandated minimum proportion of domestic programming but also specific quotas for new domestic drama, children’s programs and documentary.

The ABA’s Australian Content Standard, which replaced Television Program Standard (TPS) 14 as the regulation for Australian content on commercial television, came into effect on January 1, 1996. After concerted lobbying from ASDA, SPAA and the FFC, the ABA regulations, for the first time, contained a formal Australian documentary requirement, viz.:

At least 10 hours of first release Australian programs that are documentary programs, each of which is at least 30 minutes in duration, must be broadcast each year with the definition of documentary program being ‘a program that is a creative treatment of actuality other than a news or current affairs program or a magazine or infotainment program’.

The ABA’s accompanying notes add that

[The documentary programs may be originated by a network or purchased from independent producers. Magazine or infotainment style programs do not qualify as documentaries. The ABA acknowledges that there is a significant amount of Australian information based programming and that infotainment programs are popular with Australian viewers. However, the ABA believes that there should be some encouragement for the inclusion of Australian documentaries in the program schedules of commercial television. [ABA 1996]
Despite lobbying by the industry, the ABA did not establish a quota requirement for documentary programs sourced from independent producers. Moreover, the ABA followed its predecessor the ABT, in adopting a regulatory practice 'of setting a "safety net" at the relevant average program levels reached and sustained in the past', while also considering the 'financial impact of the Standard on licensee's operations'. [ABT 1991] This meant that these 'new' measures effectively required no increase in the commercial networks' expenditure on documentary production.

**Documentary and Commercial Market Failure**

As Papandrea (1997) has demonstrated, the reluctance of commercial broadcasters throughout this period to commit to documentary programming ran counter to substantial evidence that documentaries rated well with audiences. The Australian Screen Director's Association (ASDA) made this argument in a submission to an ABA inquiry in 1994:

In 1991, some ratings survey data was collated for a SPAA submission on documentaries. Over four months between 10 February and 15 June, 14 hours of independently produced Australian documentary was screened in primetime on Seven and Nine (Ten showed nil). The Neilsen Audience Share for these 14 hours showed a variation between 23.6% and 35.2%. The average audience share was 27.1% which are quite respectable ratings indeed upon which healthy advertising revenues can be generated. [ASDA submission 24/9/94]

This appeal was further confirmed by 1997 Bureau of Transport and Communications Economics surveys which revealed strong audience support for the broadcast of more Australian Documentaries. It was noted that there is a widespread desire to change the mix of current Australian programming schedules on television. The most often nominated category for a change was Australian documentaries with 51 per cent of respondents indicating that they would like to see an increase in such programming.

The research also stressed that "[o]ver 62% of people (the highest proportion of any of the categories tested) indicated a willingness to support additional expenditure for documentaries" [BTCE 1996, pp. 45-55].
This BTCE Research with its evidence of strong viewer demand for Australian documentaries appears to beg the question why such high viewer demand did and does not translate directly to increased expenditure on and transmission of Australian documentaries? One answer is that broadcast television is an imperfect market with corresponding market failures. In other words, since social benefits such as those flowing from Australian content offer the broadcaster no direct gain these benefits exert little, if any, influence on programming decisions. In the absence of targeted regulation, a television operator attempting to maximise profits is likely to pursue a programming strategy of attracting the largest possible audience at any given time and for any given programme expenditure. (Papandrea 1997, pp. 27-52)

Such market failure has traditionally been addressed by regulation — whose raison d'être is to alter behaviour to generate more socially desirable outcomes — and until recently a mix of subsidy and regulation has had bi-partisan political endorsement “reinforced by the ‘externalities’ of employment, tourism, trade promotion and the sense of cultural legitimacy” [AFC 1987]. In these circumstances Australia has developed a set of policy instruments — media regulation, federal and state government film support agencies, the ABA, Film Australia, the National Interest Program, the Accord, tax regimes, SBS Independent, and so on — which are the envy of many other national film and television industries. (Laughren in Fitzsimons et al 1997)

Inevitably, in a dynamic environment such measures require constant review, finetuning and occasional replacement. But now some would place question marks over the viability of such strategies. In particular, in the prevailing deregulatory climate, some regard the domestic protection of cultural industries as an anomaly which may not survive the continued assaults of free trade liberalisation. (Papandrea 1997) There is also a concern that, as we move further across the “Digital threshold” and shift from spectrum scarcity to a broadband world of spectrum abundance, the rapid convergence of the communications and information industries will not only transform the television landscape in ways that bypass or render obsolete current regulatory instruments, but will challenge the very essence of the documentary project (viz. its “truth claims”) (McQuire 1997; Winston 1995)

Conclusion

In the period reviewed in this chapter, it is clear that a primary motivation for
documentary production continued to be the belief that filmmakers and their subjects were linked agents in a shared web of social relations and that the documentary was a Public Good which could establish common ground for communication, understanding and community. In particular, the experience canvassed here suggests that, at base, support for the documentary project in Australia in these years still stemmed from a view of the individual as a citizen rather than as solely a consumer. Thus, in the period of the FFC, funding for cornerstones of the Australian documentary sector such as Film Australia’s National Interest Program (NIP) and the Accord have been grounded in a concern for social goals, goods and needs which may not always (or ever) coincide completely with those of a market economy. Particularly a market so seriously skewed by the oligopoly that characterises media ownership in Australia.

It is however unarguable that in the period considered in this chapter the Australian documentary sector has experienced substantial changes. These have included:

- The near disappearance of the category of the institutional documentary filmmaker who worked as a full time employee at, say, Film Australia or the ABC;

- The development of an Accord between the Film Finance Corporation and the broadcasters which saw television become the major means for Australian documentaries to reach their audiences; and

- The emergence of the Commissioning Editors at the Australian public broadcasters — and to a lesser extent at a range of public and private international broadcasters and cable networks — as the gatekeepers vetting Australian documentary production.

While it is clear that television broadcast has taken Australian independent documentaries to larger audiences than those achieved in the earlier independent period, it remains moot whether this access to a broader public has enhanced the role of the documentary as a Public Good. Further, in a period often characterised as witnessing the triumph of economics over politics and the retreat of the state from direct roles in many areas long regarded as its legitimate and appropriate public sphere, many view the prospects for the documentary with trepidation. Indeed, some suggest there can be only limited prospects for the documentary as it confronts:
The spectre of falling budgets;

The actual or threatened abandonment of legitimate and effective market interventions;

The mooted retreat of local content to a sanctioned ghetto on a marginalised carrier; and

The atomisation of audiences.

Together these changes have been seen as calling into question the sustainability of the documentary practice depicted in this chapter. Indeed some have wondered if the aura of the 100 year plus documentary legacy chronicled in the last two chapters can provide light enough to guide the way from the slough of low budget and policy despond.

Personally, I remain sanguine that the digital era is a time of promise as well as threat for the documentary community. I hold this view because I do not believe that the social and cultural needs that have underpinned the schemes of regulation and subsidy outlined in this chapter will diminish in the foreseeable future. In particular, I remain confident that the need to foster and reflect national identity in a global culture demands that the Art of the Documentary will continue to evolve in Australia as documentary makers uncover new subjects demanding new approaches; find new uses for current technology; develop new technologies to pursue new perceptions; and strive to reach new audiences in new ways. After all, as Cavalcanti put it in his “Advice to Young Producer’s of Documentary Films”:

‘Don’t lose the opportunity to experiment; the prestige of the documentary film has been acquired solely by experimentation. Without experimentation, the documentary loses its value; without experimentation, the documentary ceases to exist’. (Cavalcanti in Barsam 1973)

Importantly, I trust that we will continue to manage to produce documentaries that interrogate our history, are highly researched and demand lengthy and potentially unpredictable production cycles. The developing recognition of audiovisual outcomes as
legitimate research formats in the tertiary sector offers some grounds for cautious optimism in this regard, for it may be that the University can provide a new setting for these projects. Some of the debates surrounding the production of such visual histories are canvassed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE
Audiovisual History, the Broadcast Schedule and the Role of the Oral History Interview in Contemporary Documentary Practice

Introduction

As Colin McArthur, Tony Bennett and others have observed, history programming in its various guises is a staple of the television schedule and, for many of its audience, television offers the major, if not the sole, exposure to history after their school days end. The range of forms taken by this tele-history can be diverse and may include period costume drama and dramatized reconstruction of recent historical events; presenter-led journeys through particular epochs, explorations, discoveries or biographies; or thematic compilations of archival images with or without the accompaniment of interviewees and/or narration. (McArthur 1978; Bennett 1981)

The critical and epistemological demarcation between drama and documentary is often blurred and, in particular cases, extremely difficult to sustain. (Nichols 1994) However, while televisual history programming might offer many instances of this apparent collapse of categories the emphasis in this chapter is not on teasing out the niceties of those distinctions. Rather I want to restrict my attention to some programs that treat historical subjects and which the television institutions themselves categorise as documentary for the purposes of commissioning, funding and broadcasting.

Even with this qualification, there remain considerable grounds for debate between those whose primary allegiances are, variously, to the discipline of history, the institutions of broadcasting or the art of the documentary. This chapter notes some of these debates with a view to offering ways of appreciating how the submitted films have intersected with such concerns.

In addition, the chapter notes how one particular method of historical research, oral history, finds application in documentary production. The chapter includes a consideration of oral history’s relations with what has been, arguably, the dominant documentary mode of the last forty years: the interview or ‘talking head’ driven production.
Some Issues in Tele-History

Writing at a time when series such as Thames Television’s The World at War had recently enjoyed groundbreaking success, Donald Watt, a professional historian and a contributor to the 1976 study The Historian and Film (Smith 1976), began his consideration of “History on the Public Screen, 1”, by identifying a number of points for address in any dialogue between historians and what he termed ‘media professionals’. Watt’s reflections were reprinted in Alan Rosenthal’s influential anthology, New Challenges for Documentary, first published in 1988 at around the time the earliest of the submitted films Red Ted and the Great Depression was beginning its lengthy gestation.

Watt began by noting two commonly expressed, but in his experience, ‘false problems’. The first of these was that while the historian’s primary concern was accuracy, the producer’s paramount concern was entertainment; the implication and attendant problem being that ‘to be accurate is to be dull’. (in Smith 1976, p. 169)

Watt’s second ‘false problem’ was the opposition between word and vision. Watt identified a frequently expressed tension between the historian’s overriding concern with ‘words’, and the producer’s demand for ‘vision’. This was understood as setting the scene for conflict between the historian’s determination to provide an accurate and lengthy lecture on a topic (‘talking heads’) and the producer’s imperative for footage which would divert the eye ‘irrespective of its relevance to the chosen topic’ and thus conform to the expectations of ‘good television’.

Watt contended that these were ‘false problems’ because experience in the field meant that ‘there has grown up a convergence of minds and a mutual comprehension of the technical problems, at least at the level of the producer and the historian’. He was less sanguine about the state of affairs with regard to the relations between historians and ‘the administrators and policymakers’ of broadcasting.

Watt observed that it ‘is, of course, self evident that making a nonfiction film or television program on a historical theme is as much an exercise in historiography as is the composition of a learned monograph ... [each with its] own problems of composition and presentation’. He further contended that it
is equally self evident that a historical statement made audiovisually is different from one made in writing. The tempo is different, there can be no recall, no flipping back of the page, no elaboration of parallel themes by footnotes or parentheses. (in Smith 1976, p. 170)

He identified as a continuing problem for audiovisual historical composition the fact that 'there is infinitely more written evidence than visual material'. He further noted that a corollary problem of the available visual evidence is that it was 'at its richest for social history, and at its weakest on the political side'.

As someone who attempted to make a documentary featuring as its lead character a politician, E. G. 'Red Ted' Theodore, of whom there survived less than 60 seconds of syno sound footage, I can only concur.

Curses

Having established the scene, Watt then lists the 'problems the historian faces with the media [that] may best be described under the heading of curses'. (Alas, in my experience many of these curses are yet to be put to rest).

_Curse No. 1_ 'the media are administered by men of considerable sophistication, often highly educated, but of an education that in contemporary and recent history is usually a combination of out-of-date views and prejudices'

_Curse No. 2_ 'arises from the element of finance... such as, for example, the setting of a time limit for the making of the series that makes originality of thought or approach simply impossible'

_Curse No. 3_ 'is the battle for ratings'

_Curse No. 4_ 'is the straight jacket of time'

But for Watt,

the worst curse of the media is the contempt shown by the top brass for the taste
and judgment of their audience. Despite the abundant evidence of their own statistics ... they are petrified by the fear that if anything intellectually above the children's history book market is shown on their screens there will be a mass rush of viewers into alternative channels.... [They] cannot believe that waiting in front of their sets there is an educated, interested, mass audience, people unsure of their knowledge and avid for more, particularly if it will help them understand their own lives and lifetimes, and for whom there is no conflict between learning and entertainment, only between bad and good, pretentious and honest, programs. (in Smith 1976, pp. 173-176)

The Associate Producer of The World at War series, Jerry Kuehl, contributed "History on the Public Screen, 2" — a view from the producer's perspective — to both that same 1976 collection, The Historian and Film, and the subsequent 1988 anthology, New Challenges for Documentary. Kuehl began his contribution by pointing out that he is 'a producer of historical documentaries for mass audiences' and contending that 'what seems to me to be at the heart of the matter is the question of commentary ... who should write it, how should it relate to the film, to whom should it be addressed, and above all, what should it contain?' (in Smith 1976, p. 177)

Kuehl approaches these questions by first suggesting that 'as a rule of thumb, competent documentary producers begin to worry when a commentary makes up more than about a quarter of a program's length'. That is, commentary should be, in toto, no more than 1500 words or fifteen minutes long. He observes:

The historian who wonders tartly why we omitted Stanley Baldwin from our account of pre-war Germany should pause to consider what he would have included, and left out, in his own 1500 word comprehensive account of the Third Reich (even if he were not limited by the necessity to confine his exposition to subjects about which film is available). (in Smith 1976, p. 178)

Kuehl then notes that what 'conscientious producers of historical documentaries do' is make 'television programs, that is to say, works which should follow the rules of television'. And that such producers learn 'that their audience is a mass audience' watching a sequential medium that offers 'virtually no time for reflection'. Kuehl then summarises what he sees as the strengths and weaknesses of television as a medium of communication:
The medium is ideally suited to telling stories and anecdotes, creating atmosphere and mood, giving diffuse impressions. It does not lend itself easily to a detailed analysis of complex events; it is difficult to use to relate coherently complicated narrative histories, and it is quite hopeless at portraying abstract ideas. (in Smith 1976, pp. 178-179)

Kuehl’s final observation is that ‘competent producers are scrupulous in their use of film. They do not try to pass off feature films as newsreels….’. He concludes by repeating his caution that, ‘[a]cademic filmmakers ought to think not twice but three times before embarking on expositions of diplomatic encounters, analysis of abstract concepts, or complex narrative histories’. (in Smith 1976, pp. 184-185)

Here I should perhaps note, parenthetically, that each of the works submitted for this doctorate in one way or another marks an attempt to make ‘good television’ while at the same time confronting subjects and stories which, at first blush, appear to fall squarely, in Kuehl’s ledger, on the downside of the medium’s capabilities.

In my contribution to the 1993 Documentary Conference Papers edited by Lisa Noonan, titled “Negotiating History: The Making of Red Ted and the Great Depression”, my more catholic attitude to the use of a wide range of archival sources (newsreels, advertisements, dramas, documentaries etc) may be inferred from the final paragraph of that article. Reflecting on the experience of making Red Ted — which had a work in progress screening at that Sydney Conference — I concluded that, ‘[h]aving attempted to produce an archival documentary on a figure whose synch sound legacy is not quite 60 seconds, we side with Godard: “Not the representation of reality but the reality of the representation”’. (Laughren in Noonan 1993, p. 107)

Two Views from the United States

In 1979, not long after the publication of The Historian and Film, a workshop on the historical documentary was held as part of a Conference for an Alternative Cinema at Bard College in the United States. While the agenda of such a gathering was at some distance from the concerns of television producers like Jerry Kuehl, it nonetheless shared a focus on the role of narration in contemporary documentary practice.
In his subsequent reflections on that event in the article ‘Narration, Invention, History’, Jeffrey Youdelman observed that ‘a significant body of social and historical documentary films has been created by politically conscious filmmakers using oral history interview techniques’. Youdelman noted that, ‘A common characteristic of this genre is its avoidance of voice-over and other forms of narration associated with the older tradition of documentary filmmaking’. (in Rosenthal 1988, p. 454) He speculated that ‘something in the current sensibility prevents the filmmakers from turning to poetic forms’ and suggested that their spurning of narration and other textual strategies such as montage and dramatisation, stemmed from a concern to avoid accusations of manipulating either audiences or materials. In Youdelman’s view ‘the decision to shun narration and commentary is ultimately an ideological one [arising] from a rejection of what many filmmakers call “vanguard politics”, particularly the Leninist notion that the working class needs to have political knowledge brought to it from outside’.

Youdelman commented that an earlier generation of filmmakers

believed in commentary, intervention and invention. They believed in taking a responsibility for the statement the film was making. The cinema verite critique of this style of filmmaking faults the filmmakers for not capturing actuality.... Moreover, they have been criticised for presenting preconceived ideas and committing the terrible sin of lecturing. (in Rosenthal 1988, p. 458)

Youdelman notes that in 1965 when the great documentary maker, Joris Ivens, was questioned about his attitude to verite he responded that the new technology gave ‘material authenticity’ but was ‘insufficient because only commentary can express the complete, responsible and personal action — the involvement of the author, director or commentator’. Ivens concluded that ‘in verite people talk to much and the director too little’. (in Rosenthal 1988, p. 458)

Ivens’ view is shared by Bill Nichols, arguably the most influential contemporary theorist of the documentary. (Here I should note that my consideration of many of these issues was stimulated through attending Nichols’ presentation of a series of documentaries “Seeing with one’s own eyes” at the ANU Humanities Research Centre in the mid 1980s). In ‘The Voice of Documentary’, his influential 1983 article which was included in Rosenthal’s 1988 anthology, Nichols baldly asserted:
Far too many contemporary filmmakers appear to have lost their voices. Politically, they forfeit their own voice for that of others (usually characters recruited to the film and interviewed). Formally, they disavow the complexities of voice, and discourse, for the apparent simplicities of faithful observation or respectful representation, the treacherous simplicities of an unquestioned empiricism (the world and its truth exists; they need only to be dusted off and reported). (in Rosenthal 1988, p. 50)

Nichols also helpfully reminds us that ‘the strategies and styles deployed in documentary ... change; they have a history... The comfortably accepted realism of one generation seems like artifice to the next. New strategies must constantly be fabricated to re-present “things as they are” and still others to contest that very representation’. (in Rosenthal 1988, p. 48)

Elsewhere, Nichols has proposed a number of different modes of documentary depiction. (Nichols 1981, 1991, 1994, 2001) These modes include:

- The expository (the direct address of the Griersonian ‘voice of God’ commentary)
- The observational (the indirect address of cinema verite)
- The interactive (the interview based film often aligned to oral history), and
- The self-reflexive (films which draws attention to their processes of representation and constitutive practices)

For Nichols these modes are not necessarily exclusive and a single documentary may exhibit features of more than one mode. However, he notes an increasing lack of credibility for the didactic voice of God and a corollary failure of verite to provide ‘the sense of history, context or perspective that viewers seek’. (in Rosenthal 1998, p. 49) He suggests that, in response to these limitations, interview oriented films ‘have provided the central model for contemporary documentary’ and served to reinstitute direct address in the guise of social actors addressing us in interview. Nichols understands this as ‘a strategic response to the recognition that neither can events speak for themselves nor can a single voice speak with authority’.

Nichols cautions the reader:

Still, interviews pose problems... The greatest problem ... has been to retain that
sense of a gap between the voice of the interviewees and the voice of the text as a whole. It is most obviously a problem when the interviewees display conceptual inadequacy on the issue but remain unchallenged by the film. (in Rosenthal 1998, p. 55)

He suggests that "[d]ocumentaries with a more sophisticated grasp of the historical realm establish a preferred reading by a textual system that asserts its own voice in contrast to the voices it recruits or observes". Such a film "is greater than its parts, and it orchestrates them: (1) the recruited voices, the recruited sounds and images; (2) the textual "voice" spoken by the style of the film as a whole; (3) the surrounding historical context". In such filmmaking "[t]hings signify, but only if we make them comprehensible" (in Rosenthal 1998, p. 59)

Michael Renov (1993) makes a similar point in ‘Towards a Poetics of Documentary’ when he argues that

public history cannot simply be an aggregate of private histories strung together or nimbly intercut. These oral histories remain valuable for their ability to bring to public notice the submerged accounts of people and social movements. But their favoring of preservation over interrogation detracts from their power as vehicles of understanding. Delegating the enunciative function to a series of interview subjects cannot, in the end, bolster a truth claim for historical discourse; the enunciator, the one who 'voices' the text, is the film or video maker functioning as historiographer. (in Renov 1993, p. 27)

I contend that, in their differing ways, each of the submitted films attempts to use elements of textual systems — archival compilation, stylised reconstruction, carefully cast and scripted narration, montage sequences, inter-titles, interviewee captions, counter-pointed interview testimony, etc — to ensure that a sense of the filmmaking and hence the 'voice' of the film remains apparent rather than submerged. Each of the films aims to provide a public representation of an historical episode chosen for preservation. The process of registration of the particular event is then grounded in an interrogatory dialogue with the selected participants/interviewees. Arguably, the contingent nature of this 'preservation' is clearest in The Legend of Fred Paterson where the stylising of reconstructed, dramatised vignettes aims to make clear to its viewers that the film they are watching is an authored representation of a biography rather than a selection from any extant historical document.
Oral History and Documentary Production

In the practice of academic history, considerations of methodology and the scrutiny of underlying philosophical assumptions are almost inescapable. Television production, on the other hand, with its world of tight schedules, restricted program durations and a sense of the ultimate 'disposability' of its product, discourages self-reflexivity. In recent years repeated instances of this contrast in cultures have been provided by the practice of oral history and its application in documentary production.

Oral History as a distinct method of historical inquiry came into prominence in the 1970s and was often regarded by its advocates as almost inherently radical and oppositional. Some of the flavour of that pioneering phase and the promise of shedding new light on people and events hitherto 'hidden from history' is caught in the words of British historian, Paul Thompson, in his 1978 study *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. For Thompson, oral history was at once a distinct methodology and a promise of the capacity to transform history itself by empowering both the historian and the people who are the subjects of history. While acknowledging that 'Oral history is not necessarily an instrument of change' Thompson is adamant that

> It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas for inquiry; ... and in the writing of history — whether in books, or museums, or radio and film — it can give back to the people who made and experience history, through their own words, a central place. (Thompson 1978, p. 2)

The point of Oral History is, of course, to widen the sources of history by supplementing or even challenging the more conventional written evidence. To quote Thompson again:

> Since the nature of most existing records is to reflect the standpoint of authority, it is not surprising that the judgment of history has more often than not vindicated the wisdom of the powers that be. Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account. In so doing, oral history has radical implication for the social message of history as a whole. (Thompson 1978, p. 5)
By the time work began on *Red Ted and the Great Depression*, the earliest of the submitted documentaries, there had been more than a decade of opportunity for a substantial rethinking of the nature of historical knowledge in relation to oral history and memory. And this project — and indeed each of the submitted films — sought to take cognisance of the insights into the ‘mythbiographies in oral history’ offered by studies such as Passerini’s *Fascism in Popular Memory* (1987) or — geographically closer to home — Heather Goodall’s (2002) reflections on her conduct of oral history interviews with NSW aboriginal communities.

This reflection on the practice and reception of earlier oral history projects went some way to enabling us to recognise the pitfalls to which the form may be subject, and to adopt measures to avoid or mitigate those problems. Some of the key problems identified included the inventiveness and unreliability of memory, the difficulties of substantiation; the impacts of existing media representations, and the influence of the interviewer’s perspective on the ways in which interviewees tell their stories.

Like the historian, the documentary maker seeking to avoid these pitfalls is confronted by the lack of time and money available for the detailed research ideally required prior to commencing pre-production. This may be particularly the case for those filmmakers who employ interview and compilation techniques since for either approach to offer anything ‘new’ — that is to say not just the familiar faces of the ‘usual suspects’ and their well honed anecdotes or the banal repetition of already over used ‘stock footage’ — it is essential that the filmmaker has ample time for the research and development necessary to identify ‘fresh’ sources. Unfortunately, time, and the money to buy it, is too often regarded as a luxury beyond the resources of the broadcaster.

As emphasised in the preceding chapter, by the time of the development and production of the submitted projects, broadcast television was the key commissioner and audience for documentary. Often, however, this “Faustian contract”, to borrow Alan Rosenthal’s (1981) term, risks condemning all production to the rhythm of the ‘ambulance chasers’ of news and current affairs who must respond on the run to fast breaking or sensational stories. In the words of Thierry Garrel, then head of the French production division of the European cultural channel, La Sept Arte, viewers are increasingly confronted by tabloid-style programming and pure entertainment. This creates a need for an active treatment of meaningful universal
questions. The best documentarics respond to this need by mobilising the intelligence of
the viewer: they present perceptual models of our social environment and intensify our
relationship to reality through their particular form. [in DOX 11, p. 13]

Certainly the aim of each of the submitted documentary films is to offer audiences well
researched, reflective and engaging treatments of deep and long term human subjects which,
hopefully, can then empower a community to consider its democratic response to the ongoing
legacy of the issues raised in the films. As Jeffrey Youdelman puts it, ‘[t]he importance of
having a clear view of the past is, of course, to know how to interpret the present, act upon it, and
thereby influence the future’ (in Rosenthal 1988, p. 463). The following extended extract from
an ARC research proposal written in 2000 for Stories from the Split marks an attempt to identify
the requirements and scope of such an approach to an historical subject:

Aims

The primary aims of this project are to produce a comprehensive audiovisual history of
the clash of ideologies, individuals, organisations and events which culminated in 'the
Split' in the Australian Labor Party in the 1950s; and to assess the continuing impacts of
its legacy. This will contribute to the understanding of the process and outcome of these
events and to wider debates concerning the roles and the effects of extra-parliamentary
political organisations and the relations between Communism and Catholicism.

Without doubt the time to do this study is now — while the surviving but sadly
diminishing numbers of witnesses to this watershed in Australian political and social
history are able to provide their testimony. At the same time an opportunity exists to
locate, collect and evaluate a diverse range of historically significant materials presently
held in private hands, unorganised and inaccessible to prospective scholarship.

While the political significance of the Split is widely appreciated its broad features
still warrant outlining. During the first half of the 20th century in Australia, Labor and
Roman Catholicism had been closely linked but the Split loosened the ties binding
Catholics to the ALP, freeing many to cross the sectarian divide and support or play
roles in conservative governments.

From the late 1930s to the 1950s Communists and Catholics had struggled for control
of the Australian Labour movement. The spectre of Communism was not exorcised
by the hysteria of the cold war newsreels but defeated inside the union movement itself as the result of a long-term strategy devised by the Catholic Social Studies Movement under the leadership of B.A.Santamaria. That strategy centred on the formation of organised (and 'Movement' assisted) Industrial Groups which were designed to wrest control of hitherto communist dominated union executives and in turn achieve right wing organisational supremacy in both the ACTU and the ALP. Inevitably, this struggle spilled over from the industrial into the party political arena and became a contest for control of the Australian Labor Party between the right wing 'Industrial Groups' and the labour left wing.

This project will encourage those involved in these struggles to assess their experiences and share their perceptions of their own and other players' roles in this historical drama. Interviewees will include clergy, advisers to central clerical players such as Mannix and Gilroy, parliamentarians, unionists, communists and lay Catholic activists. Importantly, interviews will also be conducted with family members and the associates of activists.

While the project may be a final opportunity to have this crucial story told and evaluated by its participants, the Investigators' aim is to ensure that the complexities and ironies of the religious, ideological, social and personal components of the Split are given their full due. In keeping with the profound social and religious content and implications of the Split the intention is to traverse a range of sources that extend beyond the 'narrowly political'. Accordingly, particular attention will be given to the archives of the Roman Catholic Church and religious orders such as the Jesuits. At the same time the Australian experience will be framed by an appreciation of relevant international parallels and such inescapably related topics as the course of Cold War politics and the concerns of Catholic social thought.

Significance:

The 'Split' in the ALP and the consequent formation of the Democratic Labor Party had profound implications for Australia's political and social life and was a crucial phase in the development of our culture. An abiding significance of the Split lies in the impact, electoral and otherwise, that the clandestine Catholic Social Studies Movement's anti-Marxist mix of theology and ideology had on the Australian Labor Party during a period of anti-colonial struggles in Asia, super-power spy scandals and the rapid acceleration of atomic militarism.
Arguably, the success of leaders such as Tony Blair and other contemporary apostles of a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism underscores the continuing relevance of a topic which some may have consigned prematurely to the 'dustbin of history'.

Significantly, the proposed project represents a final opportunity to draw on the testimony of a diverse range of the surviving participants in order to review and amplify the current literature and archival resources. By including interviewees with cultural and philosophical perspectives together with more conventionally 'political' protagonists, the project will seek to ensure due respect is given to the full scope and ongoing ramifications of the Split.

The eclipse of soviet communism and the hegemony of a revived neoclassical economics have led many of the survivors of these ideological battles to reassess their engagement and its outcomes. For some of the one-time antagonists, this re-evaluation has meant a belated recognition of shared values, expressed most straightforwardly as a privileging of social goals over purely economic priorities.

The political struggle in Cold War Australia between those forces aligned with Catholic Action and those forming the Communist Party penumbra was part, albeit in a relatively benign form, of what its participants regarded as a global struggle. This view has been confirmed by recent Australian studies such as David McKnight's *Australia's spies and their secrets* (1994), David Lowe's *Menzies and the "great world struggle": Australia's Cold War* (1999) and Stephen Holt's biography of Lloyd Ross, *A Veritable Dynamo* (1996). It is further substantiated by a number of international publications e.g. Whitaker and Marcuse's *Cold War Canada: the making of a national insecurity state, 1945-1957* (1994).

Support for communist politics had risen during the Second World War, and by 1945 Communists held decisive positions of power in many of Australia's largest unions, and were close to having the 'numbers' at that year's ACTU Conference. However, even before the outbreak of the war the National Secretariat of Catholic Action had opened an office in Melbourne, and in 1942 its driving force, B.A. Santamaria, formed an allied organisation, the Catholic Social Studies Movement ('the Movement'), dedicated to exposing and eliminating communist influence.
With war’s end, the battle for dominance of the labour movement, and by extension the Labor Party, began in earnest. Encouraged by the moderate members of the ALP, the Movement aided the formation of Industrial Groups. Mirroring the Leninist tactics of their opponents, the Groupers organised in small cells, infiltrated union executive positions, and were sworn to political secrecy. Like their communist opponents, they stacked meetings, distributed propaganda and occasionally deployed physical intimidation as part of their political armoury. The most visible signs of change were in Victoria, where B.A. Santamaria organised the Catholic offensive which split the state Labor Party branch; and in Queensland, where the ALP government fell. However, the drama was played out in all Australian states and as much within the Catholic Church hierarchy and organisation as within the Labor Party and the wider labour movement.

Some of this history has been canvassed in such studies and (auto) biographical works as Robert Murray’s The Split (1970), Tom Truman’s Catholic Action and Politics (1959), Father Edmund Campion’s Rockchoppers (1982), Paul Ormonde’s The Movement (1972), Gerard Henderson’s Mr Santamaria and the Bishops (1982), Michael Hogan’s The Sectarian Strand (1987) and Mr Santamaria’s own updated Santamaria: A Memoir (1997). However, these works, by their nature, focus principally on leading players and tend largely to ignore the ‘foot soldiers’ in the struggle. This project seeks to redress that balance by restoring some of the more anonymous activists to their place in Australian political history while enabling the surviving principals to reassess their own contributions and the nature and effects of their engagements.

Ironically, given the concerns with mediation expressed by Nichols, Youdelman and others such as Philip Rosen (in Renov 1993, pp. 58-89), Stories from the Split, though the most recently completed among the productions submitted for this PhD, is the sole un-narrated documentary. In part this is an effect of the particular circumstances of its completion. Its current form was produced for a Keynote screening in the Victorian Legislative Assembly Chamber as part of The Great Labor Split 1955 - Fifty Years Later Conference, held in April 2005 at Parliament House, Melbourne. Given the nature and knowledge of the audience for such an event and the sheer volume of testimony which had been gathered during production, licence was taken to employ a more ‘purist’ oral history centred approach rather than the narrated televisual documentary style of the other submitted projects. This stylistic decision called for the interviews to be edited in such a way as to enable the interviewees’ testimony itself to provide the film’s exposition alongside the more usual menu of anecdote, opinion and analysis.
As should be clear from viewing the submitted films, my work as a documentary maker for the last 15 years has predominantly been situated at a point where oral history, documentary and television coincide or overlap. Through the series of projects slowly moving through the history of 20th century Australia, interviewees have shared with me some of their most meaningful and personal experiences; typically, in interviews of at least an hour and a half’s duration.

I have not conceived of my job as that of an interrogator. Rather my aim has been to help my interviewees tell their stories and communicate their points of view most fully, effectively and convincingly. But the limits of a TV hour can never allow me to reproduce those stories and perceptions unedited. And even a public broadcasting aesthetic demands ‘Good Television’ without the detailed qualifications and hesitancies available to the writer of footnotes in an historical text.

My sense of my task then, in projects such as Red Ted and the Great Depression, The Legend of Fred Paterson, The Fair Go or Stories from the Split has been to remain true to each individual informant’s experience, memory and perspective while at the same time endeavouring to produce an overall account which is historically accurate, entertaining and engaging. The key technique is montage.

The individual stories must be edited for brevity’s sake. But more importantly they must be juxtaposed to produce a mosaic that captures a larger sense of the arguments, clashes and personalities of the historical period. For it is these tensions which give these historical episodes their particular quality and value. There is then further craft juxtaposing these interviews with archival or re-enacted images, music, effects, captions and narration until, cut down from some 100 hours of material, the final TV hour is a long way from the ‘interview verite’ of the initial story telling. I try to be open about this process with the interviewees and by and large I would like to claim some success in retaining both faithfulness to each individual memory and a respect for the integrity of the larger historical picture.

For a documentary filmmaker, one test of the success or failure of such a process is the public screening. In April 2005 I screened Stories from the Split in the Victorian Parliament House to an audience which included several of the key interviewees: Communists, Groupers, members of Bob Santamaria’s Movement and the Labor Left and
Right. When the film ended I was heartened to see that while there was plenty of forthright discussion about the significance of the events and their legacy, none of the audience questioned the integrity or ethics of the film’s representation or the soundness of the judgment employed in its construction.

Conclusion

In 2002 the Australian documentary filmmaker Steve Thomas began his article ‘Whatever Happened to the Social Documentary?’ with the following observation and question:

With the Australian independent one-hour social documentary relegated to late night viewing on ABC TV and replaced in prime time by ‘factual entertainment’ series and docusoaps, we are starting to see the results of the growing primacy in factual TV around the world of the imperative to entertain. In light of this trend, one might ask what kind of future there is for our major public broadcaster for locally produced documentaries which explore serious subjects in depth and concern themselves with critical reflection and social change. (Thomas 2002, p. 152)

Later in that article Thomas lists what he fears may be lost ‘to make room for hybrid factual programs, docu-soaps and light entertainment half-hours financed from the same documentary funding’ as the independent social documentary. (2002, p.159-160) His list includes:

- **The relatively long time taken over the process:** At least a year in development, 6 months in production and 3 months in the edit room.

- **Complexity and depth:** A long lead time for research and the careful working of material in the edit suite enables a mining of the subject and its contradictions and paradoxes.

- **A questioning stance:** Documentary making is about developing arguments and asking why things are so rather than merely showing ‘what is’.

- **A strong point of view:** Documentaries are a means of presenting a point of view not spurious journalistic ‘balance’ and ‘objectivity’.
• **Cultural specificity:** The independent social documentary reflects Australian life, identity and issues to Australian audiences.

• **Accountability:** The relationship between the filmmaker and the film’s subjects is ongoing.

Since I believe that each of the submitted documentary films exhibits these qualities, I am obviously concerned by any notion that this type of Australian social and political historical documentary production may be under threat in the current increasingly global broadcast climate.

There are, however, some grounds for guarded optimism that the prospect for the form of independent social and political filmmaking considered here is not yet lost. One is the recent announcement of major federal government funding for Film Australia’s *Making History* initiative. In the terms of Film Australia’s media release of Monday September 5, 2005, the additional $7.5 million over three years allocated in the 2005–06 Federal budget are to develop, commission and produce a range of distinctive high-quality history programs suitable for television broadcast. These documentaries will record political, social, character-led or topographical histories across the breadth of human experience throughout Australia… Alex West the newly appointed (UK) executive producer of the scheme [said], ‘We are tremendously excited by the opportunity and are seeking documentary proposals that are based around great stories that provide an original perspective on our past.’

Daryl Karp, Film Australia Chief Executive said, ‘The Federal Government’s budget commitment provides a unique opportunity for Australian filmmakers to work at international budget levels, exploring the widest range of narrative styles from drama to archive-based documentaries. These programs will not only contribute to a growing national record but also continue to develop the expertise and value of the Australian documentary sector.’

At the time of writing there has been no public notification of the projects commissioned to date.
A related source of hope is the recent announcement from Film Australia of its ‘Zero-Fee Licensing For Documentary Makers’ scheme which offers the promise that Australian filmmakers are able to license material for documentaries from Film Australia’s audio-visual archive at no cost from 1 July 2006. As part of the company’s commitment to increasing production opportunities and finding innovative strategies that support the Australian documentary sector, Film Australia will license up to ten minutes of wholly owned Film Australia material to Australian independent documentary producers without charging a licence fee...This initiative is intended for Australian independent documentary makers only and they must fulfill one of the following criteria:

• their production has an Australian free-to-air or pay television presale;
• their production has funding from the Australian Film Commission (AFC), Film Finance Corporation Australia Ltd (FFC) or a state funding body;
• their production has a letter of interest from an Australian broadcaster or funding body;
• the producer is a film student at an Australian educational institution; or
• the producer/director is a member of the Screen Producers Association of Australia (SPAA) or Australian Screen Directors Association (ASDA)

The Film Australia press release of June 2006 reminds the reader that

A documentary is a program that is ‘a creative treatment of actuality other than a news, current affairs, sports coverage, magazine, infotainment or light entertainment program’ (Australian Content Standard, Australian Communications and Media Authority, 16/12/2004).

I await with interest the opportunity to participate in these initiatives and trust that they will take us beyond the ‘white blindfold’ view of history.
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