

FILM AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DVD

Interview with Bernie Freedman Questions by Penelope McDonald

Q: Could you talk about your involvement with the Department of Immigration, how and when you became involved?

BF: Basically, I'm a journalist. I was working in the press gallery in federal parliament until 1955 and then I was invited, I suppose, to join the emerging publicity or public relations area of the Department of Immigration. There I became involved in writing speeches for ministers and other individuals and also writing pamphlets and so on. At that time, we'd gone past the stage of getting displaced persons from Europe and we were looking at attracting as many migrants as possible, generally from Britain and then gradually from Europe, Northern Europe and then, very cautiously, moving to Southern Europe. We were concerned with preparing some sort of material that would explain to people overseas life in Australia in various aspects: the social services, working conditions and so on and so forth. Eventually, that led toward the end of 1958 to the idea of perhaps doing some films to show. By then, we had teams of migration officers in various countries and particularly in Britain. They would set up information evenings. They'd go out to various cities and towns and rather than just talk, they felt they wanted to show films. At the time, surprisingly, there weren't any films specifically aimed at telling people about Australia, and I came up with the idea of a producing a film about the way we live which eventually became *The Way We Live*.

The object was to portray how an ordinary family in Australia lived and to introduce various aspects of life in Australia; the services available and the things that people did to carry on their daily lives. It aimed to get over this business of billabongs and the bush. We wanted to present a picture of urban life in Australia because we felt most people wanted to come to an urban situation and live in a city rather than go bush. I was elected to sit down and write a film. I actually wrote an entire script before we did anything else. We didn't go out and try and film any documentary material. I sat down and designed a film, wrote a script for it, right to the point of the voiceover. We then put that out to contract and it was eventually produced by Artransa at Frenchs Forest. The director of the film was a guy named John Gray, who I've lost track of. I don't know what happened to him. The cameraman was Sid Wood. He was one of two brothers, Ross and Sid Wood. I don't know whether you saw that film about newsreels [*Newsfront*]; I've forgotten what it was called, where there were two brothers? The film was based on their work with Cinesound and Sid was the cameraman on this [project]. We didn't pick a family [as subjects], we created a family by casting. We used actors for the husband, wife and two-point-five children. We then put them in the scripted situations to demonstrate the way they went about their daily life: how the kids went to school, how the wife did her shopping and kept her house, and how the husband got the bus to work. [There was] no car in those days. That was the way the whole film was constructed.

The voiceover tried to communicate various points that didn't lend themselves to illustration by film. One of the points was about equality in our social life in Australia. For instance, one item I tried [to express] in the film was the fact of equality in Australian society. I had a line in the script that said, 'Jack's as good as his master'. I had to take the script to the Minister for Immigration at the time, Alexander Downer, the current minister's father. We were going through the script when he came across this line. Sir Alexander was a very patrician gentleman and he said, 'Jack's as good as his master? Jack's not as good as his master'. The line came out of the script.

Q: You made that film with Artransa? I thought it had been made by Film Australia.

BF: No. Film Australia felt they couldn't make this film. I don't know why they felt they couldn't make it but they did, so we had to put it out to tender. It went to a commercial organisation which had just finished making a series called *Whiplash*, about Cobb and Co and stagecoaches in Australia. They had a big soundstage and were able to build sets. In fact, we didn't use a real house for the interiors, they built the interiors to be a representative house. They were able to do it there because they did a lot of commercials and were constantly building kitchens and so on for advertisements. That's why the film went to tender. I don't think Film Australia even supervised it.

Q: Do you think [*The Way We Live*] achieved its objectives in terms of persuading British people to come to Australia?

BF: One hopes ... you don't know. It would give them some idea. It was an impossible thing to give people a real idea of what life is like in Australia but it was about the closest we could get. The main point was to get that image of the way life was lived at that time into their minds. To that extent, I think it would have helped. Incidentally, there is apparently no other film showing life in Australia in the fifties. At least, I judge that to be the case because every time someone needs a scene or two about life in the fifties in a documentary, *The Way We Live* pops up. It's quite extraordinary. We went on from making that film, some time afterwards, to doing a series of films about individual cities. They were more straightforward documentary in style. Although, again they tended to follow the idea of getting a cast together of local people, usually from the local amateur theatre, to play the parts of families and their friends. We did all of the capital cities and also Geraldton, Cairns and Mount Gambier. These were all filmed by Film Australia. A director, or assistant director, on one of them was Don Crombie who later went on to make *Caddie*. Chris McCullough [who also worked on the series] was then a very youthful fellow and now, I think, he's an executive producer at ABC.

Q: These films showed Australia in a certain way. Having looked at 150 of them, they generally show Australia as having sunny blue skies. What do you think about that?

BF: It did happen. The tendency, in those days, was always to film Australia at its best, in the sunshine. I remember trying to get some people to do something else, have a rainy day in a film, I don't think I ever succeeded. There was a feeling that you had to show [Australia] at its absolute best and obviously to show the delights of the place, like surfing, even though [the migrant] might eventually live god knows how many miles from a surf beach. We tended to do that to show the attractions. But what I was trying to do with *The Way We Live* and to a greater extent with the other films, was to get away from the really touristy side of things and try to show everyday life. However, Sydney films, for instance, tended to concentrate on the harbour when you were likely to live many, many miles away, and so on with other cities. There seemed to be no way around the idealised image that seemed to come out every time.

Q: What about the chain of command with these immigration films?

BF: Mostly, the head of the Department [of Immigration] approved ideas for the films. Production was left pretty much to Film Australia with our supervision or, in one or two cases, were put out to contract directly through my involvement. Then when the films were made, they were shown to people on the immigration advisory council and the immigration planning council and they had to get the nod from there. One classic example was the film on Mount Gambier. We had a scene where this young fellow is driving this sports car along to meet his girlfriend — of course it had to be a sports car, an MG if I remember rightly. But in the shot, he had driven over a double line in the

middle of the road. That had to come out. One of the members of the planning or advisory council, I can't remember which one, said; 'Oh, we can't have that. No, no, no, no. That's got to come out. That's really bad because it shows bad driving and that's against the law.' It had to be cut. I can't really remember too many other things that happened but that always sticks in my mind as the niggling type of censorship that you would find yourself facing after the film had been made.

Q: In the case of *The Way We Live*, you had to show it to the minister?

BF: With *The Way We Live*, it was the fact that the minister at the time was interested. Most of them weren't particularly interested in that sort of detail. But Sir Alexander Downer involved himself in the detail of the department itself, the building itself, and with some interesting results. He wanted to see the film and he wanted to go word-by-word through the script to approve it. That was simply him, normally ministers didn't get involved. People in the department, people with the advisory and planning councils did, and there was an immigration publicity council as well. We had three councils and they would take an interest. Mostly, with one or two exceptions, there was no real interference because by the time we had done the film they were usually quite happy with it.

Q: You've worked with Film Australia over a long time. Could you describe some of your experiences of working with Stanley Hawes, for example?

BF: I used to see Stanley Hawes at Film Australia. But mostly I was not working directly with him. I knew of some of his restrictions on things that could be done. One of the things was that he wouldn't allow any cameramen to use wide-angle lenses for some reason. I heard this all the time from people who were filming, that they were forbidden to use wide-angled lenses. A lot of the time I worked with another producer whose name I forget at the moment, a very avuncular gentleman called Uncle Eric. That just about summed up his connection with the production, which was not very much. It was largely the work of the directors of the films. They seemed to carry most of the responsibility and ultimately, of course, the department carried the responsibility for what happened in the end.

Q: Could you just go through the process of how Film Australia became involved with making films?

BF: Film Australia was a somewhat reluctant partner in this type of filmmaking, where a department was saying it wanted this, that or the other. They liked to make independent documentary films in the John Grierson tradition and they weren't interested much in making films that might have just a touch of commercial need or interest. They assigned a producer to the film who sort of floated around a bit and didn't do too much and reluctantly took these projects on. They were paid — the department obviously paid Film Australia to make these films — it was an interdepartmental transaction. We told them we wanted to do this, that and the other and put a program to them at the beginning of a year, eventually they agreed.

Q: Could you speak about the 'viewpoint' films? They look very clichéd now, what's in them?

BF: We made a series of films about the cities and regional centres in Australia, and Film Australia was mostly responsible for the content and approach, overseen by the department and myself. When I say the department, [I mean] by me. Inevitably, somehow or other, the films ended up showing a rather glamorous view — as glamorous as it was possible to make Mount Gambier, Geraldton or Cairns. If it was a city film, you always had the neon signs and the quick cut-aways showing a very lively nightlife, and so on. I'm not too sure who was responsible for those. I think that mostly I don't blame them, the directors of the films did that because they thought that's what

we needed to show what life was like. The brief, I suppose, was to show the fact that we had cities — it wasn't the bush everywhere — and that life there was like any big city around world. That's the way it went. The films tended to go overboard sometimes in trying to get that impression across, as one can imagine, like showing people surfing and so on. That is fine if you were doing a film about Perth, because the beaches were mostly fairly handy, Geraldton or Cairns but Sydney? There was no statement that people might be living miles and miles away from a beach in Sydney. Yet they were shown everywhere as part of our life. It was the cliché that everybody wanted to know or believe which we inevitably showed them.

Q: Do you think that when people actually migrated here they might have had those clichés dashed somewhat?

BF: Oh, I'm pretty sure, yes. The number of returning migrants to Britain was pretty high. But I often think the reasons for that didn't have so much to do with the disappointment about what they found, as a disappointment in the way that their personal expectations of how they would get on affected them. Many people who returned, incidentally, had relatives already living in Australia and had heard from them about life here, which was different from simply getting information from us. They had still gone back complaining that they were misled and life wasn't what it should have been.

Q: So these were shown mainly to British potential migrants?

BF: No, the series of films on the cities was shown to people in Europe as well as in Britain. My experience was of British migrants because I spent a long time in London working for immigration there. My experience was that those British migrants who were disappointed by what they found and who returned home, tended to be more disappointed with the fact that they didn't quite achieve immediately what they thought they would achieve. They would complain about the fact that they had been misled. But when it came to the point, you'd find that many of them had [migrated] not totally on our advice or by seeing our films but on the advice of relatives who were already living in Australia. They'd gone out to Australia and then found they didn't get on with their relatives and they didn't get on themselves as quickly as they seemed to think they might.

Q: Could you talk about the process of making *The Way We Live*?

BF: The process, where do we start? When I was in London — I spent ten years there in two sessions, doing all of our advertising and publicity with advertising agencies — the agencies, in two or three cases, sent teams out to Australia to make films to include in their commercials. Inevitably, they came back with the so-called clichés, exactly the sorts of things that we were [later] charged as being guilty of in our films. They used to have these sessions where they'd talk with people and ask them what they thought about Australia. They filmed what they were told by British people about their expectations. So they played back to people in Britain what the British felt they wanted to know about life in Australia. It was really a process of fulfilling the dreams of prospective emigrants to Australia before they went. Then, of course, when they got there and found it wasn't like that, added to other circumstances like their failure to get everything they wanted quickly, they went back to Britain. The funny thing is that they then went back to Australia again. Many, many thousands of people who went back to Britain returned to Australia a second time when they discovered that life in Britain wasn't as they'd pictured it, and that life in Australia, even though not quite what they'd pictured, was probably better.

In 1958, I had this idea that we needed a film because there was not one which showed what daily life was like in Australia. We needed a film that showed ordinary daily life in Australia as it might be lived by a family, and things that normally weren't shown in documentaries or any other films that we were aware of. And so I proposed, and the department approved, that we make a film along those lines. I sat down and wrote a detailed script of what we needed and how it should be made. I tried to give it a bit of a storyline so that we could follow a family to see how their kids went to school; where the dad went to work; what mum did at home; what the house looked like inside; and all sorts of other normal things of daily life. I actually wrote this and then we wanted to film it but Film Australia wouldn't do it. Wouldn't or couldn't, I'm not sure which. I suspect wouldn't. So it was put out to tender and to a commercial company called Artransa and was filmed by them. We didn't use real houses in those days, as they didn't seem to have portable enough cameras to squeeze into a small room and film. So Artransa put up sets of house interiors and we used those. There was a lot of filming done outside. We cast the family, selecting people who could be British, German or somebody from Northern Europe, because we had the idea that the film would be shown in Europe as well as in Britain.

When the film had been completed it was about an hour long, the reason being that the contract with Artransa set a length of sixty minutes. We actually used it at this length for a while.

I went to London after the film was shot and edited and in London I then had to do a lot of work. They sent me a black-and-white copy of the film, and I had to compare it with what I'd written in the script and ensure the voiceovers lines matched the images. This presented some problems. There were lines like how lovely it was to have a beautiful front garden but the black-and-white film didn't show it. The front garden was a dustbowl in this particular house they'd chosen to use. Using the film, I revised the script that then went back [to Australia] and the film was completed.

When it was shown at information centres around Britain, we then decided it was a bit long. The migration officers who on these information evenings decided the film was a bit too long and that perhaps it would be better if it were shortened. So I managed to get a film company in Denmark to edit it and they produced a version that was about thirty minutes long. They cut all sorts of things and finally we got a thirty-minute film, which was the one that we showed most of the time for that sort of information evening.

Q: Did you and other people from the department think that you were making films that were realistic?

BF: When we made the films, I think, the department and myself included, thought we were making films which showed Australia in its best light. I don't recall there ever being a rain sequence in any film; the sun always shone. This is partly because it was more comfortable, I think, for people to film in those conditions than in stormy conditions. We were hoping that we were conveying something to people about life here even though perhaps it was a bit glossy.

Q: In terms of content, there was no depiction of Aboriginal people. Life looks very rosy when you look at these films.

BF: Oh yes, there was no depiction that I can recall, ever, of Aboriginal people in any of the films, even up in Cairns. We didn't even seem to think that Aboriginal people should be in the films. We were tending to look at what we thought would be the experience of people going to these places and that it would probably not be being too aware of Aboriginal people. I don't think they were left out of the films because we felt it would be a bad thing to include them. It was just, I think like most Australians, we didn't think about them at all.

Q: It's interesting in terms of the market research showing an Australia that was what British people wanted to see. Perhaps British people didn't want to see Aboriginal people?

BF: The advertising agency used focus groups in Britain to discover what the average Brit thought and wanted to know about Australia. And it was on the basis of those results that commercials were made. The filming tended to reinforce what the people of Britain visualised in their own minds about Australia and wanted to know about Australia, with the result that it tended to repeat the clichés.

Q: Was there disagreement within the Department about using these clichés?

BF: In the Department of Immigration there were people who felt that perhaps we were painting too bright a picture of life. Unfortunately, the view of the majority and also the need to attract more and more British migrants and others from Europe to Australia prevailed. The need to make the place attractive, to encourage [migrants] through those sort of films to come here prevailed, it was as simple as that. I don't recall anybody saying anything very much to me about the morality, if you want to put it like that, of portraying that. Whether we did it or not, [a glossy view] was played back through advertising and commercials which we commissioned from the agencies who saw that the commercials' aim was to portray this sort of picture.