

FILM AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION DVD

Interview with Albert Moran

Questions by Paul Byrnes and Penelope McDonald

Q: Can you tell me about the origins of Film Australia after WWII? What were the conditions behind its founding?

AM: After WWII, Film Australia was really continuing something that had existed almost from the turn of the century. It was designed to serve the needs of different government departments and agencies but it was adding a new element. The new element was to make additional films that would be in the national interest. I think what the government and filmmakers had was a much broader vision of the way the government documentary information film could serve national needs, over and above those of particular departments. There was an intensive training program and a considerable expansion of the number of films that were being made. Some even grew almost to feature length with more use of actors, and overall, a real ratchetting up of the output and vision.

Q: What was the difference between films that were made before the war and films that were made afterwards?

AM: The films made before WWII actually invite a more careful investigation, some are very ordinary but there is also a number of gems. A film that comes to mind is *Among the Hardwoods*, made without a spoken soundtrack. It is musical and very lyrical in its evocation of the jarrah forests of Western Australia. After the war, the films are suffused with a new feeling. As part of the whole effort of post-war reconstruction there's a sense that the Australian nation needs careful building. That period gives us the Snowy Mountain Scheme, the Australian National University and the scientific body reorganised as the CSIRO. There's this expansion of breadth in the vision of what Australia was and what it could become. The post-war Film Australia films are part of that spirit of nation building. They also tap into an international spirit — a determined effort to create a world that is more tolerant and more aware of diversity — where people can benefit in their own society by knowing about people in different places and the difference between them and others.

Q: Where did that internationalism have its origins? The fact that the world had been through a war?

AM: Yes, it was. It's very much there in the whole effort to develop the United Nations. I think it comes about from WWII and the realisation that the ideologies that drove at least part of the world in the period before WWII had to be replaced by something broader and more embracing of difference. It also taps into some of the background of British documentary in the 20s and 30s. John Grierson and the re-founding of Film Australia post-WWII were part of that whole movement of internationalism.

Q: Who was John Grierson and what was the purpose of his visit here?

AM: John Grierson was known as the father of British documentary. He began as a public servant and was deeply influenced by a vision of service in the public interest. Grierson was a very interesting figure in that he saw an opportunity and a space between government and the public, a space in which a figure such as he could move. He saw that film could be a very effective means, among others, to help create a more informed citizenry. Through the 20s and 30s, he's involved

with a series of agencies in the United Kingdom to do with film. Government bodies like the Post Office had film units and they made films, about their basic function as a post office. This allowed some filmmakers more imaginative opportunities for saying much broader things about the society as well as the postal system. In 1940 — following a visit to Canada where he recommended to the government to transform an already existing film agency — Grierson made a similar visit to New Zealand and then to Australia. He recommended that the Australian government put a lot more effort, muscle and money behind the filmmaking endeavour. His advice to the government is: don't try and build a feature film industry. Hollywood will always be able to do it better. The most effective thing you can do is to concentrate on information films that can have an exhibition outlet, both in cinemas and also through 16 mm distribution channels. The government was slow to act but in 1945 they followed his advice and transformed the existing film agency into the forerunner of Film Australia. One of the things that it specifically embraced is the notion of the national interest program.

Q: Before the war there was no such program, people didn't talk about national interest, did they?

AM: That's right. I think historically this era — WWII and post-war — is part of a massive expansion of the state. Including the elements of state 'apparatus', for want of a better name, which includes the bureaucracy. Remember that the first buildings only appear in Canberra in the mid-to-late 1920s and the federal public service only begins to move there in the 1930s. That then accelerates considerably under the impact of war. This idea that the sponsored program can be partnered by a national interest program is part of a massive expansion of state effort going on in the last years of the war and into the post-war period.

Q: Do you think that they saw a propaganda possibility for their own sectional interests in the government?

AM: I think, to be fair to them, they did see it as non-propaganda conveying information. But, of course, no bit of information is value free. It inevitably carries all kinds of baggage with it. It represents particular sectional interests. It represents particular ways of seeing the world. Particular emphases, beliefs about what's possible, what's not possible and what's, perhaps, marginally possible. I think in some ways, Grierson was aware of this possible charge. At some point, he was prepared to concede that it was propaganda but he believed it was propaganda on behalf of democracy rather than the type of propaganda that the world had been seeing through the 30s from the left and right. So yes, making propaganda was part of the government's aim in establishing this new unit. The term used was 'films in the national interest'. What it was doing was teaching citizenship and a certain concept of what Australia was and what its possibilities were. It was also teaching internationalism.

Q: How was it caught up in the politics of the time? Let's talk more about nation building and the approach of the Cold War.

AM: From late WWII to the late 40s was a period of intense political sensitivity and suspicion. The film unit was established in this context. There were filmmakers at Film Australia who were leftist in their sympathies, some were believed to belong to the Communist Party or were sympathetic to it. There were also filmmakers who were caught up in a Catholic sectarianism, who viewed the leftists with a good deal of suspicion and even saw the Labor Party as the enemy. This gave rise to various incidents like the sabotage of film stock. Although the culprits were never found it didn't help the atmosphere particularly — that was there to contend with. The considerably expanded role that had been etched out for Film Australia stuck in the throat of the film community generally.

The film production industry that existed at that time depended, in part, on the government as a source for films that they would be involved in making. So the recruitment of people to come and work at Film Australia, in some instances from overseas and some instances from outside the industry, also upset some outside filmmakers. They tended to add fuel to the fire by pushing some of the suspicions about the political tone and aspirations of the film unit. Travelling into the echelons of government and bureaucracy, there are suspicions among journalists involved with the news and information bureau that some filmmakers are leftist. So there's a good deal of suspicion, if not paranoia, at the time as was evident with the whole outbreak of the Cold War.

Q: Would you say that it was a bit of a battleground within the film unit, in terms of ideology?

AM: Inside the film unit was something of a battleground around questions of ideology. Some of the films were seen as political and some of the filmmakers were also. Yet one of the other things that's worth remembering is that there were also very sharp aesthetic differences between different filmmakers and the international influences operating upon them.

Q: What kinds of differences?

AM: I think that two really important giants who worked at the film unit in this period are John Heyer and Ronald Maslyn Williams. Heyer is deeply influenced by various Americans and other international filmmakers, especially Pare Lorentz in the United States. He adopts some of his and other techniques and stylistic elements in films such as *Journey of a Nation* and others. Williams is less drawn in those directions and yet, I believe, really akin in aesthetic temperament to some of the things that were happening contemporaneously in Italy, for instance the neo-realist movement. I believe *Mike and Stefani*, an absolutely marvellous film, has some of these elements in them. I won't say he was necessarily influenced but Williams shared the same view of society and the world that suffuses some of the films of the Italian neo-realist movement in the late 40s and early 50s. Williams brings that same temperament and outlook and aesthetic choices to bear on the making of *Mike and Stefani*. On the other hand, John Heyer's influences come from elsewhere. Pare Lorentz and a film such as *The River* come to mind. Heyer's films such as *Journey of a Nation* and *The Valley is Ours* look to some of these different kinds of models, including the model of Russian montage filmmaking.

Q: With the Italian neo-realists, what specifically was the connection between how they saw the world and the way Maslyn Williams saw the world?

AM: They share the perception that ordinary people matter enormously. Both have an instinct to reach beyond the traditions of studio filmmaking and to go public, to take their cameras to the streets, use non-professional actors in many of the key roles in their films, and use the geography of the world around them as key ingredients in their films. In Williams' *Mike and Stefani*, there was also a very interesting holding back from the subject in various ways. These films really turn their back on the Hollywood filmmaking tradition that emphasises close-ups and pushes narrative. This mould of filmmaking instead is much sparer and holds back from that approach.

Q: Was *Mike and Stefani* a typical film for the unit to make?

AM: *Mike and Stefani* was a very atypical film and yet in some ways is a typical film. It's atypical in terms of Williams going off with the cameraman, Reg Pearse, being away for the better part of a year and finding the filmmaking subject there when he gets to Europe. Being in a position to follow it through, to include the actual interview with the immigration official and being almost feature

length, are some of the things that make it reasonably atypical. But I think also the instinctive feeling for people, society, and even the optimism that comes through — realising that the film is looking at Europe at its darkest time, especially for the couple involved — in that way the film is also fairly typical of Film Australia at this time.

Q: The migration film has a big part in Film Australia's history. Can you tell us how that connection began?

AM: Migration was very important to the nation. The war had revealed Australia's capacity to develop new industries, to grow in all kinds of ways, and there was a realisation that there was a desperate shortage of labour. One of the ways of overcoming this was to encourage the sustained immigration of peoples from Europe beginning with the UK, but also Northern and Southern Europe. As the agency that acts on behalf of the policies of the government, Film Australia takes up the challenge to make films about various immigration issues. It was a way of explaining immigration and the kinds of people coming to the Australian nation, and to make the case for a much greater tolerance that was needed to accompany the settlement of these people.

Q: The migration film and Film Australia are born at the same time in 1945. Would you say that is an accurate description?

AM: Yes, it is an accurate description to say that Film Australia and the great immigration drive to attract migrants coincide in 1945. Through the late 40s and 50s this is one of the main kinds of films that Film Australia makes. Of course, immigration is still with us but there's no longer the same need, and so Film Australia has moved on to many, many other subjects. But [immigration] was a primary subject in that post-war period.

Q: What kinds of films were they asked to make for the Department of Immigration?

AM: Film Australia was asked to make films that focussed on the newcomers. *Mike and Stefani* focuses on the European background of the newcomers. *No Strangers Here* focuses on the newcomers settling into the Australian community and *Double Trouble* opens up ways of Australians, older Australians, dealing with and coming to grips with the newcomers — trying, among other things, to convey the necessary tolerance that must accompany this new situation.

Q: What country were these migrants arriving into, in terms of welcome?

AM: If we look at the films such as *No Strangers Here*, it follows a two-way educative process. Where — through the newspaper editor first, but then through people in the factory and elsewhere — the whole community comes to realise that, rather than being a threat, the newcomers bring all kinds of gifts in the shape of themselves and their cultural background with them. It has that message for the older Australians but, at the same time, it holds out a very optimistic picture to newcomers about the settlements that they can achieve in the new land. It's a marvellously romantic and optimistic film but, nevertheless, its basic truth is a real truth.

Q: It was common to see Australia as an extraordinarily attractive place. A romantic idealism comes out strongly in these films. Can you talk about the ideology behind that?

AM: The Department of Immigration believed that most newcomers, if not all newcomers, would settle happily and prosperously in the new country. Even though some films might seem to smack of an idealism and romanticism, as far as the picture of the newcomer settling is concerned,

nevertheless that was in fact historically the case. Most migrants did settle and achieve a better world in their lifetime, or their children's lifetime. That optimism that one finds in film after film, is, I think, historically quite justified.

Q: What view of Australia did they present in these films?

AM: The films had to of necessity present an optimistic, slightly glossy view of Australia. There was no opportunity to make an absolutely grim, social-realist kind of film that might emphasise the downside of migrating to Australia and looking at the problems. There was no possible space for pessimism. They did have to look in that broader direction. I believe that was justified historically by the tremendous impact that immigration has had on Australian society since WWII.

Q: Did this necessity to present an idealised view of Australia lead to tensions within the unit?

AM: There could have been and probably were tensions at different points about the need to present this idealised, optimistic view of Australia. However, while that easily lends itself to a charge of being propaganda, the other option which was to take the most unfortunate case and follow that through would have been equally propagandist at the time. I think the filmmakers were able to accommodate the need at the time.

Q: If you look at newsreels in the 40s, there was a difference between government newsreels and the political agendas in the private newsreels, often concerning immigration. Do you think that these films were the place in which these issues could be explored, because this was before television?

AM: The cinema was tremendously important in society at that time, and a great many Australians saw the post-war films that Film Australia was making. They do play across some of the different tensions and influences that existed at that point in time. The films have a romantic, idealistic vision of the settlement of the migrants and this is sometimes at odds with newsreels, which can present a very different picture. But for most newcomers [migration] was an optimistic thing happening to them in their own lifetime.

Q: There's a very different depiction of foreigners in films of the 20s and 30s. What do you think about the way film had been used as a pro-racism tool before the war?

AM: I think sometimes before WWII film was used in an overtly propagandist, if not racist way. It often promotes views of a white Australia and warns against foreigners including migrants, particularly from Asia. We go back here to the White Australia Policy and its legacy. Don't forget that after WWII there's not that much of a shift. We look at [migrants from] the UK initially, then Northern Europe, and only a little later, we shift to Southern Europe as a source of newcomers. To some extent, those old racist worries were held at bay by the fact that these are European migrants and not migrants from other parts of the world.

Q: Would you agree that maybe films like *Mike and Stefani* and *Double Trouble* and *No Strangers Here* are amongst the first anti-racist films made in this country? I'd like to know how you see these films in terms of a larger continuum?

AM: I think *Mike and Stefani* is, in effect, the first modern film made in Australia. It looks forward. It is part of the movement to a more pluralistic society here in Australia. Although they're lesser achievements, *Double Trouble* and *No Strangers Here* are also part of that reaching out. Even though there is a sharp difference between them and some of the more overtly racist films of the

earlier periods, nevertheless these films all look to Europe as a migrant source for Australians. The immigration program did not extend to the Middle East or the Far East, as it used to be called.

Q: Arthur Calwell had been a very controversial minister during the war because he was responsible for censoring the newspapers. Do you think this had an influence on his desire to establish a government film unit?

AM: Well, there is the countervailing notion that journalists and written news stories were much more controllable and could be edited and censorship could easily interfere. They felt they could infer what audiences reading these written texts would take from them. Whereas one of the elusive if not imponderable things about film was precisely the fact that they were very often non-verbal images and audiences might take many things from them. Films always had that attraction of being able to evoke more in audiences than the written word could. But on the other hand, they always had this potential for certain subversion.

Q: Do you think that the establishment of a government film unit might have been a way of bypassing the influence that newspapers were having direct to the public?

AM: I think that reconstituting the film unit could, in part, have been a way of bypassing the newspapers and the control they exerted. During the war, Calwell had heavily censored the newspapers and the proprietors did not like that. So there was that gap or estrangement between the government, Calwell and the newspapers. Also, Steven Talents, a patron of Grierson back in the 20s, wrote an influential pamphlet called 'The Projection of England' advocating that governments, in proselytising for a new state, should consider, not only the written word, but some of the modern techniques and media appearing at that point. Talents mentions radio, photography and cinematography as new media that should be considered.

Q: Who do you think the migration films were primarily made for — a local audience or the migrants themselves?

AM: I think the migrant films were primarily made for a local audience in Australia. There is, in some of them, an attempt to dramatically explain the various kinds of problems and issues which newcomers face. *Mike and Stefani* steps one stage further back and is explaining to the Australian populace some of the terrible kinds of conditions that these people suffered during the war. It is directed to the Australian population. Implicitly, it is a plea for greater tolerance and understanding and presents the need to live with these newcomers and begin to see the world from their point of view.

Q: Can you talk about Aboriginal people's place, or lack of it, in the migration films?

AM: We're talking about Australia at a time when there is still a belief that the Aborigines are a dying nation. They're believed to be well on the way to extinction, and living only in the more remote parts of Australia. There's certainly no space in the films for encountering Aborigines living in the big cities — not that the films themselves look at the big cities in great detail. I think the closed little, idealised rural community in *No Strangers Here* is enormously revealing. And the belief is that the newcomers can settle into that community, but you're right that there are no Aborigines seen in that community.

Q: Do you think there was deliberate exclusion in the case of migration films?

AM: Oh, certainly. On the other hand, those films are idealised views of what Australia is. There's no real attempt to look at social poverty, chronic unemployment or housing shortages — these are not the kinds of things that you tell migrant newcomers about in Australia. They're not even things that you talk about much to your own population.

Q: Was it a representation of the idea of terra nullius?

AM: I think the absence of Aborigines in the migrant films is part of that whole notion of terra nullius. Aborigines are not seen in the idealised community that we see in the film *No Strangers Here* that shows new migrants settling into a rural Australian community. Everybody is whiter than white. There are no Aborigines and there's no problem of settlement. It's the whiteness of the society that is implicitly being emphasised.

Q: There seems to be an assumption in many films that everyone settled easily. Can you talk about the portrayal of settlement in films?

AM: Settlement is seen in exactly those kind of idealised terms. The emphasis in *No Strangers Here* is on the need for the Australian society to be tolerant and welcoming to the strangers, the [migrant] family. The family can in turn slip easily and readily into the embrace of that rural community. Even in a small country town there would have been Aborigines, in the cities there were problems to do with housing, to do with health, to do with occasional pockets of unemployment, particularly to do with intolerance of one kind or another. It's a very glossed over, romantic, idealised kind of vision of the society that's being offered in some of these films. Both about the settlers and about the society where settlement is taking place.

Q: Who's that being offered to?

AM: Australian audiences, primarily, but it's very much for the newcomers as well. If I can just digress, as a child in Ireland I watched the film *School in the Mailbox* and I had no awareness in coming to Australia that we were coming to a place where there were cities. I believed we'd be living in the country because the film was all about distance education and consequently I had this vision of Australia's wide brown lands. It was quite a shock to discover that Sydney and Melbourne were really very big cities, much bigger than anything we had seen up to that point in our lives.

Q: In your book you quote Catherine Duncan. Can you tell me a little bit about Catherine Duncan as a filmmaker?

AM: Catherine Duncan is a very interesting, remarkable woman filmmaker who experienced a good deal of frustration and difficulty working in what was primarily a male domain at Film Australia in the late 40s and early 50s. She's intelligent and articulate. She's very aware of some of the things that are happening in cinema and of some of the aesthetic debates that are taking place. I think, from memory, she had a writing background. She certainly came into [Film Australia] as a scriptwriter, which was one of the few ways that women could gain entry to a place such as Film Australia. From there on she begins to direct films. She is keenly aware of the propagandist element at play in many of the films being made, and the need to constantly chant a very upbeat, optimistic set of notes about Australia in films for migrants, as well as for society itself.

Q: Could you tell us about *This is the Life* and the workers' paradise that Catherine Duncan presents?

AM: One of Catherine Duncan's most interesting films is *This is the Life*, concerning Geelong factory girls. I think it displays a kind of sensibility that's not often evident in other films of the unit at this time. Remembering that Catherine Duncan was really a feminist, although the word was not well known at that time, and was also really negotiating on a personal level as a woman filmmaker working at the unit. She was criticised in various ways by some of her fellow workers, who even drew attention to the fact that she liked to wear pants when shooting films. There was a very narrow Catholic sectarianism among some of the people at the film unit at that time so that this independent woman did not go down especially well with them. I think out of a general kind of disillusionment about the way she was being treated there, she decided finally to pack her bags and go to Europe and settle, as she did, in France. She wasn't immediately driven out by any particular thing at the film unit but I think that life just got harder there. By the early 50s some of those very idealistic filmmakers have left and the bureaucracy begins to tighten up its control and surveillance of the unit. She'd be a great subject for a biography.

Q: Do you think many migrants became disillusioned from films that they saw? Did your family see any films that were specifically to attract migrants to Australia?

AM: We must have seen some films to attract migrants to Australia, films designed to inform in various ways. I certainly remember that before we left Ireland to come here, we got quite a deal of printed literature. So I am sure that there were film evenings or screenings set up in conjunction with that. In Ireland we were somewhat off the beaten track because the focus was very much on British migrants coming to Australia. These films were undoubtedly being shown to migrants. Of course, they would not have the opportunity to go back and look at those films six months or twelve months after migration and compare the kind of picture they now had of the society with the kind of vision that they were being presented with in those films. It's easy, and relevant I think, to liken it to a TV series such as *Neighbours* and the kind of bump newcomers often have when they discover that Australia is really very different to how it is portrayed in that series. There's that kind of gap between reality and what's on screen.

Q: I'd like to talk about the films that were made in the 70s and 80s. There became a need to address second generation settlement. Would you like to talk about the new type of migration films?

AM: I think that films such as *Toula* are a part of a second generation [of migration films]. Another series that comes to mind is *The Migrant Experience*. There's been an attempt to try to understand some of those older films and compare the reality of life in Australia with some of the ways migrating to Australia was sold. There's also the opportunity to look inside families, and for some of those who were historically involved, now second generation, to reflect on their own experiences and the experience of their parents. Certainly it's all part of a more general shift towards a more pluralistic view of society. In some ways, certainly from around the mid-70s on, there is a rather more bleak view of what is happening in the society.

Q: Can you talk about *Bring Out a Briton*?

AM: *Bring Out a Briton* was made in the late 50s and uses the figure of Chips Rafferty who was very well known to British audiences, both through earlier films like *The Overlanders* and also through more recent films such as *Smiley Gets a Gun*. It seemed to be part of a new attempt to bring more Britons to Australia. It trades on Rafferty being well known to British audiences. It's

also, interestingly, a little more self reflective, in that Rafferty is initially seen back to camera and then he turns to the camera and introduces himself as actor, Chips Rafferty. So it plays on being a film that is made for the purpose of trying to persuade more British migrants to come [to Australia]. I also think it's linked to development with aircraft travel instead of ships beginning to be used as part of the migrant program. Finally, it is an attempt to reassert the British element in the migrant program. That had been promised back in the mid-40s but had been quietly buried when it was discovered that not so many British were keen on coming.

Q: Do you think it was also made to encourage Australians to embrace the idea of migrants?

AM: I think it was. It came almost at the end of that first cycle of films dealing with Australians embracing the idea of newcomers, needing newcomers and, of necessity, needing also to be more tolerant and aware of the needs of the newcomers. So it is part of that whole first cycle.

Q: It's a real propaganda film.

AM: Yes. *Bring Out a Briton* almost reminds me of those pictures of 'Uncle Sam Needs You'. It's just about as direct as that and there's no subtlety about it.

Q: Who's it being directed to?

AM: I think it's directed to both the society and the would-be newcomer. It's playing particularly on the fact that Chips Rafferty at this stage is seen to be an embodiment of Australianness. On film, he personifies the tall, weathered Australian male, and British audiences knew him in this way. He is just about the perfect salesman for this, just as much later Paul Hogan is used by the tourism board to encourage American tourists. It's trading on that kind of persona as an embodiment of the Australian spirit, outlook and adventuring view of the world.

Q: *Double Trouble* is a bit different. Does it also deal with Australia not being used to people that aren't Anglo-Saxon?

AM: *Double Trouble* is a marvellous little comedy that takes a very real situation, the difficulties of the newcomer who doesn't speak English readily, and also the perhaps intolerant attitude of older Australians towards hearing different languages spoken. One has to realise that at that time on radio there was only a small amount of space that could be given to any language other than English. It wasn't allowed for any kind of extended talk to occur in any other language. *Double Trouble* works inside that particular space. It takes two representative Australian males, who are initially seen to be very intolerant of newcomers not learning the language and speaking it immediately and well when they arrive, and plunges them into the migrants' experience by putting them in a place where their language is not known to others. They find themselves at sixes and sevens. So it uses a comic device to really make that point very well.

Q: Could you talk about Film Australia's relationship with films about immigration up to 1996?

AM: I think that even from this vantage point we realise when looking at Film Australia's films that immigration has been a very important theme. Even before WWII, historically there has been this constant need to bring newcomers to Australia and, post-war, there was a very intense and concerted drive by the Australian government to assist that kind of endeavour. It's particularly evident in the films made up to the early 60s and it continues, more sporadically. Migration is such a permanent part of the landscape and of government policy that inevitably that there would be this kind of archival film.

Q: Could you talk about the legacy of these films?

AM: Film Australia films to do with immigration clearly constitute a very important kind of archive. They remind us of a certain kind of [idealised] past. And yet the films can be looked at sideways in terms of some of the different kinds of pressures, restrictions and even world view embedded in them. They retain that kind of fairy floss but yet they also talk about very real situations, problems, tensions and political strains in the society as well as in the films themselves.

Q: I'm interested in what the immigration films tell us about the nation, how we stand as a nation now.

AM: I think what the migration films disclose to us now is where Australia was at the end of WWII, and how important migration has been historically in the twentieth century to the development of our nation. [We can see] what migrants have brought to this country in helping to make a more open, pluralistic and diverse kind of society than it once was. I think that, taken together, the films speak to a sense of the movement of the society.