

FILM AUSTRALIA'S OUTBACK DVD

Interview with Gil Brealey

Q: How did you come to work at Film Australia?

GB: I started making films when I was 20 at Melbourne University. When I went out teaching I continued to make films as an amateur. From there I went to the ABC for about seven or eight years and from the ABC I was asked to come and produce at Film Australia which was known as the Commonwealth Film Unit in those days. Dick Mason was head of production at that stage. So that's how I came to Film Australia. It was about 1969. In Australia we thought producers were just the people who got the money together and made a nuisance of themselves. But in 1968 I spent some time at Universal Pictures and I realised that the producer can be an extraordinarily strong creative part of the filmmaking process. So when Dick Mason approached me yet again to come to Film Australia, I agreed.

Q: Could you describe the climate of the Australian film industry at that stage?

GB: I was here at a very exciting time because for 20 years of my life there was no film industry in Australia really. I suppose two or three films were made over that period and they were not really Australian productions, but mainly international productions that happened to use a few Australian technicians. It was a very frustrating period because there was a quite open plan from international producers to see that Australia didn't have a film industry. It was virtually impossible to have your films distributed and so no way of raising funds to produce things.

When I came to Film Australia it was basically a documentary film producer, making programs that were suitable for distribution overseas through the various embassies and it had a very specific role. It was part of the Department of Information. When I came I decided that this was an opportunity to try and expand the unit's activities into drama. I got tremendous support from Dick Mason, who was also interested in that side of it. But there was an enormous amount of conflict with the actual board. In those days we had a general production fund that I was able to use to make films like *Three to Go* and which introduced a large number of people who in the future would become major leaders in film production in Australia and overseas - people like Peter Weir, Phil Noyce and so forth. I was the person in charge of training because there was no film school at that stage and whenever a new young person came onto staff they were generally put into my studio and I used those opportunities to give the people like say, Peter Weir, who was at that stage only a production assistant, the opportunity to direct their first professional films and that was a very exciting period. Now the most exciting thing that happened, at that stage, was that we won the AFI award that year for *The Bullocky*, which was presented by Prime Minister Gorton, and at that ceremony he announced that Australia was to have a film industry. We'd been promised that many times before but this man really meant it and within the next year we had the plans to develop the film school, an experimental film fund and a development fund for feature films. That was, I suppose, the most exciting moment of my life.

Q: What do you think attracts filmmakers to the outback?

GB: I think people are fascinated by the fact that we are living on the edge of this large continent. It really is a mystery to most people and very few Australians ever visit the outback, and it's a great pity. It's one of the big challenges of filmmakers, I think, to show that this outback exists and is one of the unique things about this country.

So, I suppose, first of all the mystery of it, the question of just what is there. Such a large, large space on the atlas when you look at it. Surprise is the other thing because you're constantly running into different sorts of landscapes and different sorts of people. And the actual people who live there are very unusual, people you would never expect to find in such deserted places. People who have become hermits because they're just too brilliant a person to actually live with other people. And often people with an enormous inner life because living in that deserted area, with nothing else around you, your inner life becomes terribly, terribly important, and these people are extraordinarily interesting and very hard to get to know. So the people who go on a one or two week trip out into the centre are disappointed with the people they meet there, but that's only because they've never really had the time to get to know them properly.

I think the third thing is the beauty; it is an extraordinarily beautiful country. Unfortunately, it takes a long time to get from one location to another which is one of the reasons Australia has a problem from a tourist point of view because you've got to travel for two or three days to go from one sort of country to another. But I've always found the changes, gradual as they seem to be, are so dramatic that that's another aspect that I find very exciting about it.

I suppose the other thing is the extremes of the weather. Of course, in summer it is virtually impossible to survive there for very long because of the heat. And in the winter, the nights particularly can become very, very cold indeed. There is also the excitement of the danger. People find it a challenge to survive there, against nature and against the possibility of running into some mad man with a gun, as happens every now and then. So there's an excitement and a feeling of tension while you're there even though you're in this extraordinary, sublime, beautiful and lonely place.

Q: Could you describe some of your own outback experiences?

GB: I was making a film for the ABC called *Jackaroo*. One of the things we had to do was to go to Mount Isa area and the travel department put us on the milk run from Rockhampton which meant that in quite a severe thunderstorm we travelled in a DC3 at about 500 feet from the ground. It was a very amusing journey because the sound recordist became very ill and I persisted in eating curried egg sandwiches in front of him - didn't help! When we landed, we got out of the plane and stood there - it was an extraordinary experience because there was nothing on the horizon. You could just turn around 360 degrees and it was just an empty plain, completely empty. And I had this incredible feeling that if I didn't fall on the ground and hang on, I'd fall off. It was the most extraordinary feeling of isolation.

And the other amazing moment from the outback that came to me years later was when I was doing a film in the centre of Australia. We went through Sturt's Stony Desert. Sturt's Stony Desert, I think, is one of the most extraordinary sights anywhere in the world. Again you're just surrounded by nothing but what appear to be large rocks right around you. Rocks about as big as your hand. Rocks that go from you to the horizon. And when you bend down and pick up one of the rocks you look at it and suddenly realise it's not a rock at all, it's petrified trees - you can see the actual design of the rings of the tree and its growth. And you realise that you are standing in the middle of a forest, a huge forest that has been dead for millions of years and turned to rock. Australia is full of these sort of surprises and it's the wonder of the outback that has them.

Q: Can you talk about *Where Dead Men Lie* and where the script originated?

GB: Australians were extraordinarily inventive, particularly at the end of the 19th century. It's probably due to that pioneering instinct, having to survive on our own and make do. So it's not surprising when the French came to Melbourne in 1896 with their marvellous cinematic ware and showed their first films, that Australians were immediately inspired by it. Henry Lawson apparently saw one of the screenings in Melbourne. He was so excited by the technical future of such a device that he wrote a short story called *The Australian Cinematograph* - what is, in fact, the world's first screenplay. He describes all the things which were to become major technical developments in the cinema. Things like close ups and wide shots. He talks about sound effects, he talks about use of colour, he talks about use of dialogue. It's an extraordinary vision of what the cinema was to become. And this story became the source of the film we made which we called *Where Dead Men Lie*.

Q: What was it specifically that interested you, that you hoped would come out in the film?

GB: This probably illustrates the different roles between the producer and a director. I was to produce the film and Keith Gow was the director. So we had quite a lot of discussions about it and I wanted to make the film exactly as Lawson had described it. And I assumed that that's what Keith was going to do. Keith, on the other hand, saw it as a very interesting story, and as an opportunity to display his ability, to beat his way into the newly developed feature film industry. And so he wanted to do what most directors do to a screenplay and that is do his own interpretation. And that is a reasonable enough approach to take except in this particular case I felt that it had an historical quality to it that I wanted to preserve. So that led to a certain amount of disputes as invariably happens between directors and producers to a degree. In the end, the film itself still reflects the wonderful things that Lawson saw as the future of the film as a creative art form. Because he realised that cinema is about two major things - time and space. For the first time in an art form you could play with where things were and you could play with time. [Lawson's screenplay] says here we have one part of Australia in the spring, a lovely lush countryside. We have the desert, in a terrible drought. Then we'd change and see the drought coming over the local farm and the desert is in bloom. That was an extraordinary piece of vision as to what the cinema could do as a creative art form.

Q: The final film doesn't really show the homestead in drought.

GB: It doesn't and that's a real pity. One of the problems we had, of course, was this was a very low budget picture. I mean we couldn't spend a lot of money on this. It was made by four people: the director, the art director and the cameraman and a sound recordist - and I want to pay a special tribute to the designer who was Greg Tepper. He took on the total role of art director on the film. They couldn't find a dead dog near the dam where they were filming out at Tibooburra, so poor Greg had to fly with this rotting skeleton of a dog in a plastic bag in a single trip. He said it was the worst experience of his life.

Q: How long were you actually filming in the desert, and how did you cover both seasons?

GB: Well, they were only there for about a week and at first they shot the film around a mud hole, which was empty. We had to make it look as though it's spring and beautiful and green in the second sequence but be dry and horrible in the first, in the desert. They found a damn in drought so they didn't have to use the yellow paint but then brought a tanker of water and sprayed green paint on the grass for about 20 yards out and so it looks as though it is, in fact, the blossoming desert that the writer envisaged. And then they put the dead body of the dog and the little tin can and that was how they did it so quickly.

Another problem was that the guy who plays the central character, of course, is not Jack Thompson, although now it's very famously Jack Thompson's voice. Keith wanted to use an actor who was a total amateur, with a very rough voice which was insufficiently sophisticated, I thought, for an audience to actually see in a cinema. I persuaded him to use Jack Thompson to post-sync it. There aren't many lines of dialogue anyway so it wasn't a big job. He did the voice over as well, I think very beautifully. People don't realise in the late 60s, early 70s, there were very few actors to choose from. You were looking at a pool of no more than 40 or 50 people and they'd all been trained in radio so they all had very ABC accents. It was very hard to get really Australian people. So finding Jack was just absolutely marvellous, to use him in *Where Dead Men Lie*.

Q: The other voice is Max Cullen, isn't it? The good thing about the film is it doesn't feel amateurish at all, with that voice-over it feels very tight.

GB: It was very polished and that, of course, is due to Keith's direction. It's a great tragedy that Keith didn't make his feature film. He died of cancer some 10 years later.

Q: Let's talk about the crew.

GB: Having worked at the ABC for six or seven years I saw a lot of very, very good cameramen who really weren't being given a very good chance to express themselves visually. And when I came to Film Australia I thought there were a number of people that really ought to be working here, and one of them was Dean Semler. And Dean came to Film Australia and *Where Dead Men Lie* was his first 35 mm film. He rose to the occasion brilliantly, of course, and has gone on to great success. There were several other cameramen who came here and did wonderful films as well. And it was good to see that they were given the

opportunity to make films on 35 mm. I was very keen to make films in 35 mm because I thought we should be able to get our films in the commercial cinema. I was having a good deal of success doing that when I was here because in those days you had major feature films and you had shorts which were a marvellous place for films like *Where Dead Men Lie*. We were able to use this as an opportunity to introduce people into the feature industry. And, of course, all these people did go on to make marvellous feature films.

Q: Was *Where Dead Men Lie* shown as a short before a feature?

GB: Yes, it was. I actually had a very interesting experience when I was working for the South Australian Film Corporation soon after I'd finished producing this film. I was visiting New York and they were all very excited because *Where Dead Men Lie* had just won the top award in a Chicago short film festival and had been taken up by one of the distributors and that very day it was having its first screening in a cinema in New York. So they had great pleasure in taking me down to the theatre to see *Where Dead Men Lie* with an American audience. It was a very, very interesting experience because I sat there and I thought this is a film from out of space. It had no relationship whatsoever to the audience that were looking at it. And in fact, several people got up and walked out. But it was a very valuable experience for me because I realised that we had to break into the American market and to do that I had to have consideration for universality of the films that were made. Nevertheless, I still think we should be making Australian films and I went on to make *Sunday Too Far Away*, which is a very, very Australian film which had no success whatsoever in America, but I still believe it was important because it was important to the industry within Australia and to the Australian public, who supported it very well.

Q: So the American audience didn't relate to the characters or the location in *Where Dead Men Lie*?

GB: No. I suddenly realised if we were to make really genuinely Australian films, how foreign they appeared to be in America. And just sitting there with the audience - I have always made a point of sitting with audiences a lot when I make a film - and I sat there and I realised that this was a film that didn't relate to them at all.

Q: What would they have needed? More high drama?

GB: Yes, they would have wanted more dramatic impact. And also it was a celebration of an Australian writer who they'd never heard of. They wanted more conventional story techniques. After all, American audiences are extremely parochial and the only reason that Australia has been able to break into the American market is by copying in many ways the devices of storytelling the Americans use.

Q: Can you talk about the general logistics and problems?

GB: Originally, I thought we wouldn't go to the outback at all because we just didn't have the budget. I was able then finally to get a little bit more money to make the film and Keith persuaded me it had to be shot in the desert. We were actually looking at sandhills around Sydney but it would never have had the

atmosphere if we had shot it here. So that was Keith's doing, he twisted my arm in that case. As a creative producer, I always said I would challenge a director three times and if he still persists with his position I let him do it because obviously it's terribly vital to his vision and if a mistake happens then I have to bear the blame. But in this case it was right.

I suggested Tibooburra because I'd been there on a film with the ABC and I realised what an incredible town it was, still looking very much as it was 20 years ago. And I knew that there was plenty of desert within a day's driving from Tibooburra and also there was accommodation there. These are the things you have to think of from a practical point of view. I mean, can you get a water truck? You can't take a water truck right into the centre of the desert. You have to be able to find locations that are near the facilities you are going to need. And you have to find accommodation and places where they can have a meal and so on.

Q: And what about the technical problems in terms of sand, keeping the cameras clean, especially with 35 mm film?

GB: Using 35 mm film in the desert is always difficult. Any form of mechanical equipment that you use in a desert is a problem because in parts of these deserts the sand is so fine it's like talcum powder. Sometimes we would have three plastic bags over a camera just to keep the dust out of it because once you get one little grain of sand in the gate the film was going to be spoilt with scratches. If any dust or wind is coming up you have to protect the equipment and sometimes stop shooting for a while.

The other thing working in the desert, is that even today the communications are very difficult because there are no trains and trams and buses going past you can pop on to take you to the laboratory. So if you have a camera breakdown or something of that nature you had big problems. That means you really have to protect your equipment much, much more carefully. I actually told a visiting Japanese crew about this and they laughed at me and said, look, if we can shoot in the Amazon we can shoot in the centre of Australia. It was interesting when they did finally shoot in the centre of Australia they had enormous technical problems because their equipment kept on breaking down.

Q: And if you get a scratch you don't get your film back from the laboratory and discover it.

GB: That's right. With only a week's shoot the film had to be got back to laboratories and I had to contact them to say it's OK. I wasn't on location in the desert for this film. Firstly because we couldn't afford another plane fare and secondly because I think a director should not be haunted by people standing behind him. A creative producer is part of the relationship between the director and the audience. The less he knows about the problems you have shooting the film, the more he will be able to say, "look, that is a good scene, that is a bad scene, that communicates because I'm looking at it now as an audience".

Q: Can you talk about the technical advances that happened in filmmaking from the 50s into the late 60s?

GB: I began making films in the early 1950s and in Australia, in particular, we were very limited in the equipment that was available. There was very little equipment for hire in those days because there was no industry here. One of the worst things was there were very few film laboratories that you could trust. In Melbourne there was nobody. We had tremendous problems and we in fact finished up making a big drum out of three-ply and sticking gramophone needles in it and would make a little trough under it and wind our film on to it and get under the stage of the Union Theatre and process it ourselves. In fact, we did reversal processing and the quality we got from it was infinitely better than anything from the two professional studios that were there. In Sydney, of course, there were two other studios, which did do extremely good work. But in Melbourne it was terrible.

One of the biggest limitations we had was the use of sound, recording of sound. In those days recording sound was extremely primitive. If you were doing location sound you virtually had to have a truckload of equipment because the actual sound was recorded optically on 35 mm film and then processed and replayed from processed film, the negative. And to save the film stock we used to record the sound on both sides - we'd turn it around and use the other side. This, of course, placed enormous limitations on being able to use sound. The other thing was that the cameras, if you were using 35 mm, blimping a camera was an enormous process, it was something that two or three people had to carry. So when you went out into the outback it was extremely difficult to do sound on location because it was just so inconvenient and you needed so many people to do it. I think one of the remarkable things about John Heyer's film [*The Back of Beyond*] was the fact he was able to shoot sound on location and have a sound truck there. It was one of the first times. In fact, for documentaries, *Back Of Beyond* is one of the few films that actually used sound.

For feature films, of course, it was a different matter because you had a larger crew anyway and when the international companies came here they brought their own sound trucks with them and took them back. The problem of the equipment in Australia was increased by the fact of that when these crews did come here, we were never allowed to keep any of the equipment that they brought with them. When they were shooting *On the Beach* in Melbourne, I was working with the State Film Centre. The cameraman for the State Film Centre said, oh this is good, we'll try and get some of the lighting gear because the lighting gear was very primitive in those days. And he spoke to some of the Australians on it and they said, no, we can't provide you with this nor can we sell it to you because we have instructions that anything that we can't take back to the States we must destroy. It was a very, very aggressive attitude from America and England to see that Australia didn't have a film industry.

Lighting was another big problem because at that stage you had to use big arc lamps or Klieg lights. And these again are very, very heavy and take a lot of time to set up and need a lot of power. Film Australia was one of the few organisations with a generator that was blimped. In fact, it was one way Film Australia kept the budget going because if there was a major film that came around, the blimped generator was one of the things they used to rent out. It was the size of a huge semi-trailer, of course, which you couldn't possibly take into the desert. And so when you went out into the desert what you went with were some reflectors and a 35 mm camera and very simple sound recorder

It wasn't until the late 50s, early 60s that we started getting really good portable sound equipment. Up until that time you had to have 240 volt supplies so that you could record interviews inside or dramas in a studio, but when you went outside it was mostly post-sunc. That was another problem because we didn't have the actual facilities to post-sync very well, we didn't have "rock-n-roll" sound systems and we certainly didn't have the digital equipment that you have today. The worst thing about it, however, was that none of the actors had ever been trained to post-sync. It is, after all, an acquired ability to post-sync to your own voice. In fact, some people say that the Australian film industry died not so much because of the lack of distribution in the 1920s, but it was the introduction of sound at the end of the 20s - that somehow or other we were not able to get the facilities or the finance to make films with sound because the adding of sound to a film did add enormously to its production costs.

Of course, many things changed after that time. Starting in the 60s when we were finally able to do "living camera" work. We actually practised with our cameramen with huge Arriflexes on their shoulders and so forth trying to do walking shots and moving shots. And that living camera technique which is now so familiar and which is an essential part of all documentary filmmaking, really didn't take off until we had that equipment. I found it frightening because I thought we are now getting to the stage where we can intrude on people's lives so well and so effectively that this places enormous ethical responsibility on the director and producer, and the cameraman to a degree. There are times when you can film people when they don't know that you're filming them and so forth. And even though people agree to be filmed, often they don't realise the effect this is going to have when it's shown to the public, particularly their friends and relations. But while they may be carried away even today with the idea that it's great to be in a movie, they are really shocked sometimes when the actual results come and they're not really being treated fairly. I felt it almost in a way removed the potential of documentary. Because if the director and producer has a really ethical standard, you suddenly realise that you're intruding far more than you ought to. I often thought that maybe this was the time that you went to dramatise documentary and that in fact the people that we are dealing with may reveal all these things, but through actors.

I think the final piece of equipment that has got to be invented for the filmmaker is an ethics meter and it's not something that is going to be created with certain limitations on it - that becomes a form of censorship. What has got to be implanted in every director's and producer's mind: how would you feel yourself if exposed in this way to your closest friends? If you can say that you feel comfortable with that then maybe you can get other people to do it. But you've got to think about it.

Q: Can we talk about the inventions that really changed the face of documentary making in the 60s?

GB: In the 60s we saw some incredible changes on the technical side of filmmaking due, I think, to a great extent to television. Because television suddenly had a news department, suddenly had documentaries being made that were going to be shown frequently, the very mechanism of the camera had to be reconsidered. Suddenly you saw cameras like the Eclair and the Arriflex being

produced which were self-blimped, they could be used in sound situations and didn't make a lot of noise. That was one of our big problems in the old days, that we had cameras that chattered away all the time and we couldn't record sound at the same time. So you suddenly had the Arriflex and the Eclair that could be handheld, it could be put on your shoulder, it could be moved around, it was easy, it didn't take four people to lift it up and put it on a tripod.

And the other thing was the introduction of the Nagra sound recorder, which went over your shoulder and which could be used just on batteries and at the early stages had a little wire that connected you up. And this gave you sound which was superb quality, an amazing development at great expense at that time.

But even more so was the use of microphones, because in those days microphones were pretty hefty things that again needed big stands to hang on them on, and were not very portable or mobile. And also they were very general, not specific enough. One of the big problems recording sound is that when somebody talks it sounds all right to you because your ears have actually focused on what that person is saying whereas a microphone listens to everything and doesn't have the human brain's facility to sort out the background. So when along came these shotgun mics, as we used to call them, which could actually focus from some distance away, you could get the sound coming directly from the person's mouth. That was an extraordinary advance in the process of making documentaries because a sound recordist could wander around with his microphone in his hand and he didn't need another person standing there waving a boom around.

Q: Shall we talk about Crystal sync?

G B: Later on one of the great things that happened was the introduction of Crystal sync, which meant that the camera and the sound recording equipment could be in different places and weren't tied together. I've seen some very funny scenes when cameramen and sound recordists are covering some exciting event with a cable between them and they're almost strangling one another. Once the Crystal sync camera came, you could move separately.

All of these advancements, of course, cost money and Film Australia has never been well financed. It's always had a shoestring budget and many of these things took a while to come to Film Australia. One of the other advances that we haven't talked about is the zoom lens. In the early days you had fixed lenses and if you wanted to go from a close up to a mid shot, you actually had to change the lens or swing it around on a turret. Both those things broke the action and broke the actual documentary situation that you were in. Even in a dramatic feature situation the use of the zoom lens was a great advance. Unfortunately, when they first came they weren't particularly sharp and the resolution on the lens was not very good and lots of cameramen hated them and refused to use them because it was a reflection of their ability to keep something in focus. Nowadays, of course, the zoom lens is accepted everywhere. But I remember even in 1968 when I was at Universal Pictures in Hollywood, the young director that I was observing was making his first film. He said he wanted to use a zoom lens and Universal, which is one of the best-funded organisations in the world, suddenly went into a flat spin because they couldn't produce a

blimped camera with a zoom lens on it. And I was able to proudly say, well we've adapted one of our 35 mm cameras back in Australia the year before to use the zoom lens and it hadn't been that difficult. I was amazed that even in America that time the zoom lens was not a popular device.

Q: Could you explain 'blimped'?

GB: One of the problems about using cameras in the early days was the chatter, the noise that the camera makes as it is passing the film through the gate. You had to stop that chatter if you were going to also record sound at the same time. And so what was developed was a series of boxes, which used to fit around the camera, and these were called blimps. They blimped the sound out so you couldn't hear the chattering noise. The great advance when we got the Arriflex 16 mm and the Eclair and all the others at that stage was they were self-blimped. The manufacturers of the cameras had actually built the soundproofing into the camera itself so you could carry it as one unit, whereas in the old days we had put the camera into a blimp, into a box which was soundproofed with lead and plastic.

Q: Could you tell me what you did after Film Australia?

GB: I finally left Film Australia in 1972 and worked for most of 1972 as a tutor at Macquarie University. I have moved from production to teaching backwards and forwards at many times in my life. I always found it a very valuable thing to do because I learnt a lot from my students. So after I'd worked at Macquarie University for one year I then applied for the South Australian [Film Corporation] position and was appointed. And so for the next four years I worked as the Founding Chairman and Director of the South Australian Film Corporation. It was an organisation which was meant originally to make only ten short films a year. It was set up by Philip Adams to do that. I soon realised that that was not what Don Dunstan wanted. Don Dunstan wanted an industry and Adelaide had two or three small companies run by just one person who were not terribly successful at finding international or even local audiences. So I had to actually build it up from the ground. There was no equipment there, there were no facilities and in three years I was able to establish big editing suites, sound recording suites, a studio. I also had to run a film library for the schools and for the general public so I had to build a new studio, a new library, which was completely computerised. The first computerised library in Australia where you could go in and push a button on a computer to see what films were available. This was some very novel thing in 1973, I can tell you. And so that's what I did for the next four years.

Q: What are your most memorable experiences of the outback?

GB: As a filmmaker going into the outback, I think the thing that struck me most was the variation of colour that is just extraordinary...the red sand or the blasted grey plains. And the presence of the sky is just so enormous - you suddenly realised how enormous the sky is. And you have this vast circle above you, which is the sky, particularly at night - you see stars you've never seen before.

Sound is the other thing, because you can hear your heart beat in places. The silence is just extraordinary. During the day, in particular, when everything has gone quiet, there are no animals, no birds, nothing. Just complete, absolute silence, and then the sound of a little bit of the wind rising, the sound of sand falling across. All of that I think is extraordinarily moving. The thing most of all is that when you're on your own, you get this focusing in on yourself. No wonder that most of the great religions come from the desert because when you're in those situations, you're thrown upon your own resources so much and your own mind so much that the introspection is extraordinarily rich and very powerful.

Another amazing thing is you go to bed at night on your camp stretcher in the middle of the sandy desert plain and there's nothing there, no animals anywhere, you've never seen anything moving at all. In the morning you wake up and the wind has come and gently blown the sand smooth, and you look down and it's covered with little wrinkles where snakes have been and little hopping things where mice have gone through and the whole ground is covered with evidence that, in fact, it's full of life - life that you never see.

I was struck when camping in Depot Glen in the Sturt Desert [a ravine with a water hole where Sturt spent six months] that time ceases to exist in the desert because you're almost living as the explorers lived - you're out there on your own.

When you go out into the desert you realise that we Europeans were never meant to be in this country. It is not a physical mass that is suited to the exploitation that we've brought to it. And particularly now when you start to see the awful effects - that we're going to turn the rest of the country into desert. You realise that the sort of life of the Aboriginal people - who were very careful about preservation - is the very thing that we are not good at, and it's a tragedy.

I think film is extraordinarily important to bring the experience and the vision of the outback to people who never go there or only for short periods of time and don't have a chance to get an idea of what it's really like.