

FILM AUSTRALIA'S OUTBACK DVD

Interview with Ian Dunlop

Q: What attracted you to work in the desert?

ID: I'd only been in the Commonwealth Film Unit a year and I was asked to direct a film out in the desert on a very remote weather station called Giles, which was in Western Australia, but close to the border with the Northern Territory and South Australia. It was probably the most remote settlement in the whole of Australia. And this was my first trip into the desert. I thought the desert would be something like the Sahara, you know, bare sand hills. And I went out into this absolutely beautiful country, the beautiful red soil, the rugged red rock hills and it just blew my mind; I thought this is the most beautiful country in the world. And I've had a love affair with the desert ever since.

It was also the first time that I had met any Aboriginal people. Camped near the weather station were several families of Aboriginal people still living a traditional hunter food-gatherer life and so I had spent as much time as I could to with them. I used to climb the rugged Rawlinson Range and look out over this vast expanse of spinifex and mulga and see the smokes of the individual family groups, way, way in the distance and it was then I thought, I want to make a film 'A Day in the Life of a Nomadic Family', so that's when my dream started. But it was a long time before I realised it.

Q: How did that come about?

ID: After that trip I put in a proposal – "A Day in the Life of a Nomadic Family" - but Aboriginal subjects weren't in vogue at the time and I was only a production assistant and it was more or less ignored. So I bided my time, and I got on as many films that would take me into the outback as I could. And then in the early 60s, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was formed and I thought: right, this is a body that might sponsor such a film. But by then I wasn't sure how many people were still living in the desert, because they'd been leaving the desert, patrols had been going out bringing them into government settlements. I knew one of these patrol officers who used to go out and meet people, so I arranged to go out with him, on my holidays, on one of his patrols to try to find out whether there were still people in the desert.

So in 1964 I went out on a patrol. It was just two weeks but it was a lifetime experience. We met 42 people in several families. After that trip I put up a proposal to the Institute and they were interested. And then I took the Producer-in-Chief of the Film Unit, Stanley Hawes, to the local pub, gave him a beer, and said, "Could I have six months leave without pay to do this film?" and he said, "Well I think this is the kind of film the Unit should be doing, what say the Film Unit produces it and the Institute sponsor it" - you know, finance it. This was agreed. Very lucky because without the support of the Film Unit I could never have done it.

I spent a year planning it in immense detail. And I don't mean scriptwriting because there was no point writing a script - I had no idea what I was going to meet. But planning it logistically because, especially in those days, if you were

going out into the desert you had to plan it very, very carefully. If you forgot one thing, that was it, because you were going to be very isolated.

When the time came I got a very talented cameraman called Richard Tucker and a young anthropology student, Bob Thompson, now Professor of Anthropology in Western Australia, as he was the only man I knew who spoke any related Western Desert dialect. We went to Alice Springs and there we bought six weeks supply of food (which is an awful lot of food), petrol, water, camping equipment, spare parts and film equipment, two Land Rovers, two trailers and at that stage I started panicking - how on earth we're going to load all this gear on.

My idea was to go back to the country I thought I knew, where I'd been a year before for two weeks, but then in Alice Springs I met a wonderful old patrol officer I knew called McDougall. He told me not to go back in that country, it was incredibly dry, drier than usual, and he'd been there not long ago, no sign of people. But he'd been much further south recently and met 22 people whom he'd taken to Warburton Mission, which, of course, is 22 people less that I could film! But he told me the only family that he thought was still definitely out there - he called the "Sandhill" family - he'd met them two years before and they were in sandhill country, north of a well called Tika-Tika.

So we went to Tika-Tika and there were all the signs of these 22 people who'd been there just a fortnight before - a clump of emu feathers in a tree, broken wooden dishes, quandong nuts - and there were some wheel tracks going further north, through the sand, so I thought well let's just go on before we go all the way to Warburton to pick up guides.

So we went on in the hopes that we might meet people. It was a very strange feeling. I'd been dreaming of doing this project for eight years and now, here I was going out and I had no idea whether the nearest people were over the next sandhill, ten kilometres away, or not there at all. So we went on and I saw some hills in front of me which I reckoned were the Clutterbuck Hills, and I thought: I'll just go to those, climb them and see if I can see any smokes. We'd been burning spinifex to make a smoke to see if anybody would reply.

I went on with the cameraman. We'd just been going a short time and the cameraman said 'smoke' and that was the most beautiful sound I've ever heard, because that meant there were people. There was this column of smoke going up. So we swung the vehicle around, until we got in such rough, stony country we couldn't drive over it any more, left it, ran up over the hill and down the other side. There was a dry creek bed and there were the fresh tracks of a man, a child and a dog and the bushes which had been burnt, but nobody there. They were obviously frightened because we had no Aboriginal people with us.

We retraced our steps, back to the main road, dumped all our gear there, the trailers, went on to Warburton, picked up guides who belonged to that country but who really could speak very little English themselves, and retraced our steps to our last camp; and the guides went thump thump thump on the top of the vehicle. We stopped and they said, "Djagamara", and there were the footprints of the man who had made that smoke and by looking at the footprint they could tell who he was. They knew him - he was Djagamara - and they guessed he'd be at a site called Bodian

So we went on. It was just getting dusk, incredibly rough country, going very, very slowly and then we went over a ridge and there was a dry creek and miraculously it had this pool of water - very, very rare, surface water - and camped the other side of the dry creek bed was Djagamara and three wives and seven children, which was an absolutely classical desert family and I thought, wow, just couldn't believe it. We went up to him and I had no idea what our guides said to him because I don't think they could have had much idea of what we were doing anyway. We introduced ourselves as best we could, then went back to our vehicles the other side of the creek. Djagamara picked up his spears and his spear thrower and his wives picked up their wooden dishes and they moved their camp, they camped right by our vehicles and that was it. Luckily we started filming almost right away, because they only stayed with us a few days actually, but we got some very good material with them and then they moved on.

Q: How did the family respond to the cameras? I've seen photos where you're really quite close and they just continue on. How did you overcome that?

ID: Well you're right, we did get close to them and they didn't take any notice of us. I mean, maybe it was because they didn't really know what we were doing, but they weren't self-conscious at all and they obviously knew that we were incredibly interested in their life and their technology. They just did what they were going to do. Every day the women went out and got grass seed, so we just went out and filmed them. With Djagamara flaking his stone flakes sometimes we had to obviously stop to get in closer, or change angle or change the film magazine, and we just asked him to stop and there was just no problem. They were incredibly hospitable, understanding. What they really thought, I don't know. In a way it raised all sorts of ethical problems because we weren't able to communicate with them, we weren't able to explain what we were doing, so they took us on trust, which was a difficult situation - unlike much more recent filming where people knew exactly what you were doing and often dictated what you were to film or not film. In those days the situation was one of really huge trust, a huge responsibility, a huge privilege.

Q Could you tell me about the problems of the rough terrain and the multi-skills of the cinematographer?

Ian: I suppose almost 90 per cent of a trip like that was actually logistics. When we were travelling we would get up to eight or so punctures a day. It was just hard, hard work. Lugging 44-gallon drums of petrol and water in and out of trailers, always lugging equipment around, fixing things in the vehicle. It was the most physically demanding trip I've ever done.

Richard Tucker the cameraman, he was a very talented cameraman working in extraordinary difficult conditions. I mean the dirt! You know none of us washed at all because of the lack of water, except we allowed Richard Tucker to wash his hands so he could change film in the changing bag. None of this DV business where you just flick a little cassette into the camera.

Working with flies - just terrible. Flies in your mouth and your eyes all the time. We could brush them away but when Richard was filming he had to keep filming with both hands.

Also what I discovered was that he was a bush mechanic, and he was able to fix many things. Not on that trip, but two years later on another trip into the desert, we broke an axle on one of these vehicles. So we put this Land Rover up on blocks and Richard Tucker just stripped it down. There were all the bits, all the cogs and that, all lying neatly in the sand and then we got on the Flying Doctor network and radioed for the spare part, and he went in to pick it up.

Meanwhile, while we were waiting, one of the Aboriginal men that we'd been filming - he'd been out hunting on his own, it got dark - he lit a grassfire to light the way back and this grassfire started roaring towards our camp. Well, we could only just get all our gear into two vehicles and two trailers with a day's packing and here was this fire coming towards us and there was only one vehicle, so we got all Richard Tucker's gear (because he had his own gear) into the vehicle. We got our own personal gear into the vehicle, and we made a neat little pile of Film Australia's gear to sit there and get burnt because we couldn't take it! It was about 112 Fahrenheit - I'm not sure what that is in centigrade these days. We were actually all suffering from heat exhaustion, so we were all a bit zonked, but luckily one of the old men that we were filming - he was one of these really wise, powerful men and I didn't realise it at the time - but he sang to the fire and it just moved away and didn't come to us. So we didn't have to explain what happened to one vehicle on blocks and all the Film Australia equipment!

The axle part came and we drove to Warburton and picked it up and Richard Tucker put it all together again.

Q: You were in daily contact with the Flying Doctor, were you?

ID: Yes. I wanted to keep in daily contact with the unit and let them know how things were going, or if there was a crisis, let them know. Like there was a crisis once when our generator broke down, which we needed for charging the camera batteries. So we sent a message to the unit saying send a new generator and I don't know how they did it but a new generator was flown in to Giles Weather Station, a few hundred miles away. I drove to Giles and there was the generator. To this day I don't know how they organised it, which is what I mean by saying I could never have done it without the support of the Film Unit - they had the muscle to order I-don't-know-what transport into Giles.

Then I remember I was driving back from Giles (and these were long, long days), driving back at night and there was a little track, just with a kind of sand bank on either side, driving along with the trailer, and the generator, 44 gallon drums, a fresh 44 gallon drum of petrol and all of a sudden a wheel passed me. I thought: my God, what's that? And then suddenly - zonk! And it was the wheel of the trailer. The axle had cut straight through it clean and the wheel went zonk. We had to unload all the gear from the trailer, load into the Land Rover, dump the trailer, and go on. You know, that's what I mean about logistics - it was hard, hard.

Q: I can't believe you had a generator out there!

ID: Yeah, just a little one.

Q: What were you filming on?

ID: None of your video, none of your DVD. This was before the days of video. This was 35 mm film, not even 16 mm film. In those days nearly all the film the unit shot was in 35 mm, which is the gauge that they use in cinemas, the big gauge. And I think the camera we used was a camera called an Eclair, which was a fairly small 35 mm camera, so it could be used handheld or on a tripod. We used that and a lot of the filming was handheld, with Richard Tucker.

In those days there was no such thing as handheld sync sound shooting, where your sound was automatically linked to the film. If you wanted to use sound, this was a whole big deal because the camera made a lot of noise. So the camera had to be put in what we called a blimp, which meant it couldn't be handheld. The sound equipment was a huge amount - another vehicle full of equipment, another couple of people, sound engineers. So, it was logistically ridiculous to think of shooting synchronised sound. I decided to shoot it silent.

What we used to do often in those days with documentary films was put artificial sound on. We'd make sound in the studio and lay it in. But the kind of style of filming I wanted was to be as truthful as possible. If I didn't have sound, I didn't want to make artificial sound, so I decided to have it silent except for a very simple commentary, which I gave myself. Again, because I didn't want it to be a professional commentator, I wanted it to be the voice of someone who was there and had seen what was going on.

Q: And you decided to do it in black-and-white? Also it was the mid 60s and Nagra's were out in Europe but not here.

ID: This was 1965 and I think that 16 mm synchronised sound was just coming into Australia, so you had light 16 mm cameras that were silent and you had this new tape recorder called a Nagra which is like a small knapsack you strapped over your back - a total revolution in professional sound recording instead of having this massive equipment - and you linked it with a cord to the camera. With this, you could maintain sync between sound and camera.

But I don't think this had come to the Film Unit, it certainly hadn't come to me, so I just did this film in 35 mm. Later on, my filming was all 16 mm sync sound, not video. Of course, this meant that when you filmed, you couldn't play it back; you didn't see it until you got back to the studio. So it was a whole different kind of atmosphere of filming.

I shot in black-and-white. Why? Because I thought this was probably the last chance ever perhaps to film this remarkable and, I thought, really beautiful way of life. These people living in this incredible environment, a harsh but beautiful environment with seemingly so few resources, but having a rich and meaningful life. I wanted it to be as beautiful as possible and I thought that black-and-white was actually more beautiful than colour. And as it turned out, black-and-white lasts much longer than colour - it doesn't fade. So these films will probably be

around long after all my colour films have faded. And I think black-and-white must have suited Richard Tucker because he was able to get really beautiful tones on people's skin with the 35 mm.

Q: What did you do with the stock out there? How did you keep it cool and get it back to Sydney?

ID: Well, how did we keep it cool? We tried to keep it in the shade. We probably kept it in fridge boxes but, of course, we didn't have ice or anything. It was a nightmare trying to keep things in the shade because, of course, the sun moves around, so you're always moving gear to keep it in the shade. We had to keep it (the exposed film) for days before we could get it back. But when the first family left us and I went to Giles to get more film, that was an opportunity to take film back and dispatch it, and then days later on the Flying Doctor network we'd get a report that it was okay. Of course, if it hadn't been okay, there was nothing you could do about it. Only on one or two occasions were there opportunities to get the film back, so it was a real strain. Was it all scratched with the dust? Was it getting damaged by the heat? It was a huge testament to Richard Tucker's skill that it wasn't scratched with dust because, of course, there was dust everywhere!

Q: In the photographs I noticed both of you were standing around with fly nets on. Djagamara didn't think that was rather strange?

ID: No. I think they were very wrapped up in their own culture. And all of the stuff we had, it was just so much stuff. We were crazy white people with all this crazy equipment and I don't think it really meant too much to him. I mean, the food and the water we had meant a lot, but I don't think all the equipment. The fly nets didn't mean much and when Richard Tucker was shooting he had to lift up the fly net. The flies are always pretty bad in central Australia but actually on that trip in '65, they were the worst I've ever experienced - they were just terrible.

Q: Can you talk about when you went back to civilisation? What did you look like?

ID: I didn't want to go back. When it was time to go back, I thought oh, it's too far to drive all of that in a day or two, let's make an extra camp, because I just loved this freedom of camping in the desert. But eventually we got back to a motel in Alice Springs. And I remember going to the room, looking at myself in the mirror and seeing my moustache, it had like five days of food caked on the moustache. And then getting back to Sydney was a real culture shock - just coping with the traffic and the roads - I just thought how can I get back to the desert?

Q: What happened to those people you filmed?

ID: A year or two after we'd filmed Djagamara he was actually met again by this old patrol officer from Woomera who took him back to Warburton Mission. And in the desert these people - colds and influenza were unknown, there are very few diseases out there - so they're leading a very healthy life. And as soon as they get to a mission or a settlement, they catch colds and coughs, which become

very, very serious illnesses. Djagamara developed pneumonia. He was put into hospital, he ran away from hospital, and he died. But many of his family still are living at Warburton or small outstations from Warburton. People have now gone back into the desert and set up small settlements.

I had the opportunity in '94 to go back to Warburton. I took all the films on video to give to the community, and had lots of screenings. Paul, my guide, came back with me and we screened the films to the children at Warburton. Paul would take over the screenings and in his own language talk all about what they were looking at. And every so often I heard the word "true culture" because he was saying to the children: this is our true culture, this is how your parents lived in the desert. I met people whom we had filmed 25 and 27 years ago, Djagamara's senior wife, Gadabi, she was now living there – a very, very important senior woman. We went to Tika-Tika and then Paul said: look, there are just the very remains of the camp that we filmed them making 27 years ago.

It was a very moving experience meeting these people again. One of Gadabi's son's is called Ian - his English name is Ian - which I think they decided to call after me, I'm not sure.

Some of the people came down with their art and had an exhibition in Sydney a few years ago. And with the pictures they had stories about this man Ian who came to the desert when they were living in the desert and took pictures of them. So it was quite an experience for them, they obviously had feelings about it but we didn't know about this at the time because we couldn't talk to them.

Q: Could you talk about the editing process?

ID: The equipment was terribly old-fashioned in those days compared to what it is today with digital editing. The film was a negative, so from the negative you made what we call a work print, and this was the print that you used to cut the film, because in the cutting process the film got very scratched, because we had very old-fashioned editing equipment. And, of course, we were only cutting film, not sound. Every time you wanted to make a cut, you got a grease pencil and you made a mark on the film. You made all these marks then you took the film out of the editing machine, put it on the bench with two winders, wind through, you came to one of your cuts, you cut it and then you had a hot splicer, you made a cement splice. And every time you cut it you lost a frame either side, or two frames either side. You spliced it together, you waited till the cement dried, you moved on to the next cut. Very tedious business and you couldn't run back try this, try that as you do with digital filming today.

Q: Who was the editor?

ID: I edited it. One of the most important things in the commentary was to name people because up to now in most films made about Aboriginal people, they weren't really named, they weren't people. It was more difficult when you weren't using synchronised sound, but I wanted them to be not nameless people, but human beings with relationships, with a family, the family unit. Sometimes people have accused me of just saying what you see, in the commentary, but if you listen carefully it's Djagamara does this you know, his daughter so and so, his wife so and so. Trying to show respect, dignity

Q: That was a break from past tradition. What brought you to that?

ID: I don't know. I suppose this kind of filming came to be known as ethnographic film or, today, visual anthropology, observational cinema. I'd never heard of any of these terms when I did this. I just felt I wanted to make this detailed study of the life of these nomadic people ever since I met my first desert people way back in the 1950s. I had a huge respect for them and their way of life and their dignity, and I just wanted to portray this. Then as years went by and I continued with this style of filming, I became aware of what was going on overseas. And then, of course, with synchronised sound, it was much easier to get close with your people and you got a much closer relationship and this whole movement of observational cinema, visual anthropology developed.

Q: What did you study before going out there?

ID: At Sydney University in the very early 1950s, I did just a couple of years of anthropology as part of an arts course. I didn't do honours, but I'd always been interested in anthropological subjects but not with the idea of becoming an anthropologist. I'd never as a boy had this burning ambition that I definitely wanted to do this or that, but after university I tried to join the Film Unit. I couldn't right away. I had a spell in the ABC before the days of television, but then I eventually joined the Film Unit. I wanted to go into the outback and do these films and also combine it with a certain artistic element of filmmaking. It combined these two interests of mine: going into the outback and trying to do something creative. That's actually why I joined the Film Unit and, in time, I was very lucky in that I was able to blend those two – well, I hope my films have some artistic merit [laughs]. I think I was very privileged.

Q: How long did it take to edit your films?

ID: On that occasion I made ten detailed films and the one general film, *Desert People*. The series I called *People of the Australian Western Desert* Parts 1 to 10 and I think it took about a year in all to edit those. I got the opportunity shortly after that to take those films and other Australian ethnographic films to Europe, and luckily they seemed to go down well. And because of this when I got back to Australia and the Film Unit, I was able to continue in this style. In fact, the unit gave me a remarkably free hand and resources, so I was very grateful to the Film Unit and also lucky that it was the 60s and the 70s when there was the fully funded Film Unit. You didn't have to worry about getting television pre-sales. So that while my films in terms of filmmaking were very cheap films, a very small unit and simple editing, there was the money around to do this kind of thing.

Q: What was working with Stanley Hawes like?

ID: When I first joined the Film Unit, Stanley Hawes was the Producer-in-Chief. He was a mixture of being a bit of a stickler for certain styles and being a great encourager. I remember in the early days he always used to sit in at rushes. And he had a fairly strict hand on all the films that were made. But once I started this particular style of filming, he didn't interfere at all and nor did anybody else in the unit. I mean, without him the unit would have ceased to

exist because he fought all the battles to keep the Film Unit in existence, so in actual fact he did a great job.

Q: Can you speak about the audience for your films?

ID: When I went out to make the films, I didn't have a very clear idea who the audience was. Once I got back to the cutting room, I decided to make ten real 'record' films using nearly all of the material. I thought that the films would probably be used for the record and perhaps for university students and postgraduate students. However, as it turned out, the films have been used very widely in schools. The New South Wales Education Department made a kit based around the films.

Q: How do Indigenous people respond to them?

ID: The community at Warburton, which is now the headquarters for this group of Western Desert people, they have copies of all the videos and I know they look at them. Some people may choose not to look at them because of problems with people who've died. In the wider community it's hard to say, except that certain Aboriginal people who are in the educational system, they seem to respect the films, they speak highly of them. I'm sure there are ones who find problems with them, and at some stage I'll probably be confronted with this. Although up to now it hasn't happened, which of course I'm very happy about.

Q: What do you believe attracts people to film in the outback?

ID: The sheer beauty of the outback. I had this real love affair with the desert country. I think it's God's chosen country - the sparseness of it, where in the desert everything is important, each clump of spinifex, each flower, each wind ripple, each animal track over the sand, it assumes great importance and great beauty. Another reason, I guess, is the adventure. Let's face it - it's adventurous getting really out back in the outback, it's exciting. And the other thing, and very importantly, is the people of the outback, whether they be nomadic Aboriginal people or maybe the people on the land, farmers, they have a certain closeness to the land and it's interesting, I think, meeting and working with these people. And for me, meeting some of the last families who are living a nomadic life in the desert, it was one of the most exciting experiences of my life and certainly one of the greatest privileges I've ever had.

Q: What does the desert country make you feel?

ID: One doesn't want to sound kind of romantic about it, I just had this deep feeling of...I suppose...of a communion with nature. I suppose you could say it is a kind of a spiritual experience without getting wishy-washy. A huge sense of freedom, it's just you and the countryside, and everything is meaningful.

Q: Exactly where was it you were filming?

ID: In the Gibson Desert, which you'll see on your maps. We filmed at an Aboriginal well called Tika-Tika, and north from there at Badjar where I met Djagamara and his family. Then a few more hundred kilometres further west is what was then Warburton Mission. You're dealing with huge distances. You don't

really do it by kilometres or miles because it depends on the roughness of the journey. A lot of the time you're travelling at three kilometres an hour or something, going over rocky country or over spinifex.

Q: Were there trails?

ID: Well, once we got to Tika-Tika, and there were clear tracks going there, there were just two wheel marks going further north which I thought might be maybe national mapping or a geological survey or something, and tracks in the desert last a very long time unless there's heavy rain - one set of wheel marks can last for years. So we just followed those; sometimes they got very faint, we lost them, we picked them up. I kind of wondered whether I was crazy doing this without any Aboriginal guides, but we went on and then when we saw the smoke we left the tracks and went on, and then went on on foot and found the tracks of Djagamara. But from then on there were no tracks at all. So there were certain tracks we were following to certain places, but from then on we were just making our own tracks through the desert. When you had Aboriginal people with you, you didn't worry about getting lost. To them, it was just like wandering the suburbs, going to a supermarket - they knew it intimately; but on your own, it was a different matter.