Filming the Legends of Phar Lap and the Don — the Who, What, Where and When

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By any standards of excellence, 1930 was a banner year for Australian sport and sport followers. It started remarkably. The young Don Bradman, coming off a cricket season where he had risen from good to very, very good in his first tilt at the 'Poms', played a game against Queensland in early January where he hit 452 not out in 415 minutes. He was just 21. Several contemporary commentators suggested that the innings had elevated him to 'national hero' status.[1] If it didn't, then the forthcoming northern hemisphere tour of England certainly did. In that golden summer of 1930 Bradman hammered the English bowlers, from Headingley to headaches, the Oval to exhaustion: 254 in the Second Test at Lord's, 334 (including 309 in one day) in the Third Test, and 232 in the Fifth — at the superhuman average, still standing for a Test series, of 139.14. *Wisden,* cricket's statistical bible, referred to 'the art of infallible batsmanship _ raised to unprecedented heights by the mastery of the young Bradman'.[2]

Shortly after, as the Bradman feats lingered and luxuriated in the hearts and souls of all Australians in the southern hemisphere spring of 1930, a gelding bred in Timaru, New Zealand (by Night Raid out of Entreaty) named Phar Lap, winner of a lowly maiden Juvenile at Rosehill in his first nine starts, emerged in the very same season of content to win eight races in a row. These included the Chelmsford and Hill Stakes, the Craven and Randwick Plates, the first of two Cox Plates, and culminated, as has been exhaustively documented, in a three-length Melbourne Cup win. Phar Lap was odds-on. He is still the only Cup winner to score 'in the sauce'.

Throughout 1931, Don Bradman and Phar Lap — exalted man and much loved beast — confirmed their pre-eminent place in Australian cultural history. In Bradman's Scrapbook No. 13, in Adelaide's Mortlock Library, an uncited newspaper item of the time proposed an unusual coupling of legends:

> When Phar Lap was given an exhibition gallop at Randwick on Saturday, I recalled the suggestion of a correspondent before the latest Melbourne Cup. He declared the greatest drawcard would be for Don Bradman to be Phar Lap's ... jockey, as both were 'stayers'.[3]

A fanciful claim, but one reflecting the passion, bordering on adoration, of the moment. It was undoubtedly this community outpouring which prompted the making of two culturally invaluable films now housed in the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra: the first of eight-and-a-half minutes, entitled 'Don Bradman in "How I Play Cricket"', and the second, a short film of just on ten minutes, showcasing Phar Lap as 'The Mighty Conqueror'.

Sporting Film Classics

These classics of Australian sporting film history, arguably our two most famous clips, have in recent times been made more familiar to younger generations of Australians through the persistent efforts of Peter Luck in his television programs over the years dedicated to re-visiting, and celebrating, Australia's past: Phar Lap rolling in the sand; Phar Lap streeting the opposition in the 1930 Melbourne Cup; Jim Pike extolling the champion qualities of the best horse he ever rode; the Don middling a golf ball with a cricket stump — driving, cutting, as it ricochets off the water tank in Shepherd Street, Bowral. Most of us have these striking images embedded in the psyche. We know them. But what virtually no-one is aware of—including, it seems, the Don himself now, according to an interview I had with him in June 1997[4] — is the set of stories concerning the individuals behind the cameras of those two early 1930s films, and the controversial cultural context in which they were made.

This article will provide that context, first by enlarging on the precarious state of the Australian film industry in the later 1920s and early 1930s, as silent film became experimental sound film; and, second, by briefly discussing the individuals involved in the artistic process of both films -ranging from the director, early pioneer filmmaker Paulette McDonagh, to the script writer for the Bradman film, renowned Australian poet Kenneth Slessor. For Australia's two most famous sporting short films, I will answer the who, what, where and when.

The Context

First, the historical and cultural context. In 1927, the year that the St

George Cricket Club began paying the train fare for their latest recruit, Donald George Bradman, to travel up from Bowral each weekend, and a year which Phar Lap spent gambolling about the Timaru paddocks dreaming of trans-Tasman glory, the Australian film industry was in a state of crisis. Despite some abundant years (such as 1911, when at least 60 narrative features were made) the industry had in the later 1920s hit upon hard times. The reasons were complex. One school of thought, articulated most effectively by the premier Australian film-maker of the time, Raymond Longford, had it that the 'Combine' (the fiercely criticised Australasian Films Inc.) was 'systematically frustrating the activities of Australian "film" producers ....' The other school levelled its criticism, even at this embryonic stage of Australian film development, at the United States of America, and its parasitic Australian agents. This school wished to expose America's increasingly aggressive cultural imperialism. Such was the anger felt by many Australians involved in local films that the conservative Bruce-Page Federal Government appointed a Select Committee to inquire into the whole issue — a committee which quickly gave way to a Royal Commission. The film industry had become genuine national news.

From June 1927 to February 1928, the Commission interviewed some 250 people, whose collective evidence produced over 1000 pages of testimony. Witnesses included the usual suspects, community wowsers keen to emphasise Australian society's moral disintegration; but they also included an impressive cross-section of the film industry's finest — Longford, the young Charles Chauvel, Arthur Shirley, Louise Lovely, Frankyn Barrett, John Gavin and Frank Hurley.[5] Raymond Longford, measured but seething, carefully documented the insidious role of the 'Combine'. Australian film-makers, he alleged, were being shut out of their own cinemas by their own countrymen. Frank Hurley, Australia's finest early documentary film-maker (in the Antarctic and on the battlefields of World War I) took a slightly different approach. In his words:

> What happens at present is something like this: Mr Jones, of Timbuctoo, is quite willing to book and feature an Australian or British film. But his theatre is booked up. When he is asked to accept a local production he says, 'Yes, I'll take the picture and shelve my American program, but you will have to pay for the picture I shelve'. So the American picture earns whether

> it is shown or not. Obviously this position is ridiculous and ruinous.[6]

Hurley's was powerful and articulate testimony.

The evidence of any number of the witnesses summoned to the Royal Commission makes absorbing and still relevant reading today, addressing issues of national identity and national building, decades before they became central scholarly concerns. But the testimony of one witness, a young female actor named Isobel McDonagh, is for my purposes especially interesting. Speaking on behalf of her two equally young sisters, one a producer, the other a director, and recalling their recent first joint film project, she said:

> We started against great opposition. All our friends advised us not to proceed with the venture, but having confidence in ourselves we persisted and I think succeeded. At first we had difficulty in placing it ... we have found there is a strong prejudice on the part of exhibitors against Australian pictures.[7]

Isobel McDonagh was talking about a film called Those Who Love, made in 1926, the first of a total of four feature films that she and her two sisters made between 1926 and 1934. The films to come were *The Far Paradise* (1928), like *Those Who Love* a silent film with an urban setting contrasting a privileged upper middle class with a desperate working class; *The Cheaters,* a 1930 talkie using essentially the same formula; and *Two Minutes Silence,* a highly provocative anti-war film, based on a contemporary play, which focused on four people in the household of an army general who, during Armistice Day's two minutes' silence, relate their war memories. Actor Isobel McDonagh's two sisters were producer Phyllis and the most talented of the three, and director of all four films, Paulette.

Paulette McDonagh

When describing her sister Paulette in 1971, Phyllis said she was 'the quiet, authoritative type'.[8] In 1932, in the middle of her active film-making period, one journalist called Paulette 'probably the most outstanding figure in the Australian motion picture industry today'.[9] Like her sisters, Paulette McDonagh attended 'Kincoppall', the Sacred Heart Convent at Elizabeth Bay, Sydney, through the World War I years and beyond. Her father was Dr John McDonagh, leading Sydney doctor and honorary surgeon to J C Williamson Theatres. His hobby interest in stage and film became his daughters' passion. After leaving school,

Paulette saw as many films as possible, absorbing lessons simply by watching what in her opinion worked and what did not work. Many years later she could still recall audiences laughing at embarrassing scenes in Raymond Longford's *The Pioneers* (1926),[10] and she determined not to repeat what she felt had become the tired and largely irrelevant cliches of the infant Australian cinema: overplayed, stage-shaped, melodramatic acting; horses; guns; and bush settings. The audacious Paulette McDonagh dismissed the trappings of this genre as 'Dad 'n Dave idiot stupidity'.[11]

One of her most ardent admirers was the New South Governor, Admiral Sir Dudley de Chair. His comment on the first McDonagh film, *Those Who Love,* is worth our attention, both for the insight it gives into the brash McDonagh technique and the 1920s priorities of American and Australian film-makers:

> The girls have caught the right idea of giving people a story they love—the story of lovers with their trials and tribulations, partings, happiness and misery — a story of real life. There are no improbabilities. You don't find a super gunman 'shooting up' a score or so of desperadoes, pulling stage coaches to a halt on the brink of precipices, or other wild flights of imagination. You don't even find the man they couldn't hang, or the squatter's son backing all the winners at the Melbourne Cup.[12]

The first three McDonagh films gave Australians urban soap operas before we had such a category; however, as the industry contracted, and Bradman made runs and Phar Lap won races, the substance of Paulette McDonagh's film-making underwent a significant change. She would be directed by circumstances to apply her considerable skills to the burgeoning culture of Australian sport.

Those Who Love made a profit sufficient to fund the second McDonagh film in 1928. But *The Far Paradise* foundered in a social climate which had turned against the Australian product. Cultural cringe was rampant. Hence, in 1929, McDonagh was looking for backers for her third project *The Cheaters* — and she found one in the film producer Neville Macken, a school friend of Paulette's brother John. Since the Australian film industry in the 1920s and 1930s was something of a narrow circle, Macken in turn brought in his co-founder of the Standardtone Company, Jack Fletcher, an excellent cinematographer and also, according to an interview Macken

gave in 1971, a 'genius' in the new sound technology.[13] Despite the fine reviews given to the first two films, and even though Macken and Fletcher added their collective experience and dollars, *The Cheaters* was undermined by the difficult transition the industry was experiencing, from silent to sound technology. In fact, *The Cheaters* was first made as a 'silent' and then, in desperation, in sound. With this uncertainty contributing to its fate, the film bombed. Paulette, years later, recalled:

> *The Cheaters* was at first a bitter experience. Later we learnt to accept it as a whim of fate. We simply started over again and produced about a dozen short films.[14]

Her memory was faulty; the actual number of short films was probably six.[15] Regardless of the number, later interviews confirm that the shift in creative focus was a direct response to straightened circumstances caused by the relentless pressure on the Australian film industry. McDonagh needed to regain some financial stability, and what better way to do it than to produce a few docos aimed at cashing in on the public's sporting obsession — an enthusiasm probably enhanced by the economic and social severities of the Great Depression.

Sporting Films

Between 1930 and 1932, in addition to the Phar Lap and Bradman films, Paulette McDonagh directed documentaries on Andrew 'Boy' Charlton, the Olympic swimming team, a kangaroo hunt and, perhaps most ambitiously, a short film on the Aboriginal predicament in Australia, entitled *A Stranger in His Own Land.* This was a courageous thematic choice in an era where sympathy for Aboriginal Australia was at one of its lowest points. Macken and Fletcher seem to have collaborated on most, possibly all of these short films. In addition, as Macken recalled in his 1971 interview, there was another sometime though significant member of the team: renowned Australian poet Kenneth Slessor.

The circumstances of Slessor's involvement are that Theo Smith, son of *Smith's Weekly* owner Sir James Joynton Smith, was asked to write the script for *A Stranger in His Own Land* but did not think himself appropriate. This was presumably like Rupert Murdoch securing young Lachie to pen an introduction to the latest Angus and Robertson contemporary poet. Theo, fortunately, had the good sense both to decline the task himself, and to suggest to Macken that 'we've got this poet Ken Slessor [on staff at Smith's]'.[16] Kenneth Slessor would eventually see the film ten times, and

for £5 provided a script. While those involved in the making of *Stranger* were evidently thrilled with their in-house bard's humanist contribution, the script's iconoclastic intentions reflect the racist fabric of Australian society in the 1930s. Macken endorsed the result, four decades later precisely recalling the film's last lines, delivered as the Harbour Bridge fades into a boomerang shape:

> ... and so the man who owns Australia changes to the man who Australia owns. Where once he gathered wild honey, [now] trains and motor [cars] hoot at him, a stranger in his own country tramps along ... the road to nowhere.[17]

This melancholy conclusion stands in total contrast to the film's light-hearted beginning, where two Aboriginal friends sit next to a fire chatting. They are making a boomerang, Slessor's script tells us, in the 'Goanna Cafe', talking 'bunyips, pretty gins, the high cost of bandicoots ... ' It is humour of the kind where unconscious racism could at any moment slip into the full-blown, yet somehow it avoids it.[18]

The production team of *A Stranger in His Own Land* so liked the net result in their film that Slessor was hired to write the script for 'Don Bradman in "How I Play Cricket"'. For this task, he was well qualified. Having left the *Sun* newspaper to join the *Smith's Weekly* staff in 1927, Slessor stayed with the magazine for the next thirteen years, becoming editor, then editor-in-chief.[19] During that time he wrote widely on sport, particularly on cricket during the Bodyline series.[20] Yet, despite this experience, the Bradman script is hardly vintage Slessor. The commentary, held together by a cluster of modest metaphors, might qualify for a grade three introductory poetry course, but it now seems hardly an adequate complement to McDonagh's fine film: the water tank 'as full of angles as Euclid's pet hedgehog'; the difficulty of the stump and golf ball exercise being akin 'to catching sharks with a safety pm'; 'eye like a gimlet'; 'wrists like quicksilver'; and so on. Of course, the fashion for bad punning in early newsreel commentary, established in the early 1930s, would last for at least the next 30 years, as the wonderful film *Newsfront* cleverly depicts.

The odd thing about Slessor's saccharine script, where the Don gallops 'up the footpath like a big schoolboy', is that it was produced by a writer undergoing, at that precise time, a severe deterioration in his personal circumstances. In June 1931, Slessor wrote to Norman Lindsay:

> Everything in this accursed place seems to be wrong. I'm sick of trying to compromise with life in it. I've left my wife, and

> quarrelling with practically every acquaintance; I suffer from indigestion, bad teeth, debts, frustrations and a sense of loathsomeness ... [21]

As biographical studies have shown, Slessor was not a particularly personable fellow; in fact, some acquaintances identified in him severe personal disfunction and numerous contradictions.[22] In his poetry of the period, Slessor either worked on some of our most serious and finest narrative poems, lyrics and eulogies, or he was indulging in poems about 'Backless Betty from Bondi'. When he ventured to put Bodyline into verse, the result was the poem entitled 'Body-Line', a prototypical piece of Slessor light verse:

Body-Line!

Sweet Miss Prue, in a crinoline frock,
Was a hot performer at postman's-knock;
In the ding-dong days of '94,
She banged the devilish battledore —
Sweet Miss Prudence, sweet Miss Prue,
Why do you hesitate, what would you do,
Where would you wander, and how would you frown,
If YOU went in First Wicket Down?

Dear Miss Lilia, Tennyson's pride,
Was a first-class fiend on a croquet-side;
The 'Nineties thrilled as they watched her stoop
With a deadshot eye on a little white hoop —
Dear Miss Lilia, dear Miss Lil,
What would they meditate, how would they thrill,
What would they think, those goggle-eyed lads,
If YOU walked out in a pair of pads!

Little Miss Peggy is frequently found
With an autographed bat at the Cricket Ground;
She fields square-leg, but I'm willing to swear,
Her legs are anything else but square.
Little Miss Peggy, little Miss Peg,
Ours is the theory, yours is the leg—
How can we barrack you, how can we frown,
When YOU go in First Wicket Down?[23]

Unfortunately, it is this whimsical side of Slessor that is reflected in his Bradman script, rather than the perceptive sports analyst and elegant literary stylist.

In a May 1932 edition of the Sydney *Sun* newspaper, we find the following short item:

BRADMAN TALKIE SHORT

> Don Bradman rose yesterday from a sick bed to supply data necessary to the completion of a talking film, 'How I Play Cricket'. He was suffering from influenza.
>
> A few weeks ago, the Misses McDonagh produced a talkie short of Bradman, which provides some intimate studies of his home life at Bowral, and features the methods that he adopted to reach champion class as a cricketer.
>
> Bradman sailed this afternoon by the *Niagara* for Vancouver, with Arthur Mailey's team. The film will follow on the next steamer, and Bradman intends to use it extensively for purposes of illustration, throughout his tour.[24]

Jack Pollard adds to the story in his *The Complete Illustrated History of Australian Cricket* (1992), suggesting that Jessie Bradman was given permission by the Australian Cricket Board to join the Arthur Mailey tour for 26 of its 100 days, and that during that time she 'acted as the team's hostess when it entertained, attended all receptions, and helped [Vic] Richardson [the captain] compose his speeches'.[25] We must be cautious about this information, however. In my 1997 interview with the Don, he was absolutely certain that the film did not go to America 'on the next steamer' and it was not shown on tour, by him or anyone else; Mrs (Jessie) Bradman joined her husband for the entire tour; Mrs Bradman was not the team's hostess; and she did not write any of Richardson's speeches.

Matching written sources to oral testimony, we all know, can at times be a frustrating pursuit, but it is worth reiterating that, on the points raised here, Bradman was adamant, just as he was on the fact that the water-tank used in McDonagh's film was not a studio prop, but the Shepherd Street original of his youth.

Paulette McDonagh's 'The Mighty Conqueror', on Phar Lap, does not suffer from a Kenneth Slessor collaboration. Rather, the film contains some extraordinary footage of the Red Terror, Tommy Woodcock, Jim Pike and a couple of interviews which confirm for us that if the technology of sound accompaniment to film in the early 1930s was raw, so too were the human participants attempting to use it. The interview with Jim Pike, for example, is an especially awkward piece of footage, as interviewer

and interviewee mutually grapple with the unfamiliarity of the technology. Notwithstanding, it is a priceless sporting treasure for later generations. In an era, and a country, where drawing the 'persuader', the whip, on a horse is taken for granted, Pike's philosophy with horses in general, and Phar Lap in particular, is worth recalling. As he put it in an interview, published in the *Referee* in late 1931:

> It has never entered my head to pull the whip on Phar Lap because there has been no necessity ... I am not an advocate of the use of the whip. Punishing horses went out with straw hats. But it's not because of this conviction, that I have never felt the need to hit that great horse. Even in the Melbourne Cup he did all that was required without punishment, and he is the sort of generous, great-hearted thoroughbred who always will do his best without a touch of the whip.[26]

Aware, as a whole nation now is, of the fate of Phar Lap in the United States, Jack Fletcher's nostalgic frames at the end of 'The Mighty Conqueror' (of the ship departing Australia's shores, bound for America) assume considerable poignancy, as our jovial narrator bids farewell to our greatest racehorse: 'Goodbye old man, cheerio, bye bye'.

Conclusions

Paulette McDonagh and her two sisters, Phyllis and Isobel, made a unique contribution to the early Australian film industry at a time when the onset of the Great Depression and oppressive American cultural and economic imperialism made life for the Australian film-maker difficult indeed. Yet it was precisely these straitened circumstances that led to Paulette McDonagh making the two treasured sports films discussed here. Without them, our culture would be the poorer.

Following Paulette McDonagh's last controversial feature film, Two *Minutes Silence,* there would not be another full-length feature directed by a woman in this country until Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career,* 45 years later. For doctrinaire feminists, McDonagh would appear to constitute an important reclamation project, but it would be as well to check her out thoroughly. As feisty and opinionated late in life as she was in her twenties, McDonagh, in one of her last interviews (in 1977) was asked about the subject of the emancipation of women. She replied:

> I hate women. Most of them have nothing up top, and the militant side of the women's liberation movement has done

> more harm than good to the so called quest for equality. I've always been a man's woman.[27]

Always the opinionated individual, McDonagh is a problem for the more rigid end of the sisterhood.

Notes:

1 Jack Pollard, *The Complete Illustrated History of Australian Cricket,* Viking, Ringwood, Vic., 1992.
2 Barry Morris (camp.), *Bradman — What They Said About Him,* ABC Books, Sydney, 1994, p. 67.
3 *Bradman Scrapbook,* vol. 13 (1931-2), Mortlock Library (SA).
4 Interview with the author, 24 June 1997.
5 Ina Bertrand, ed., *Cinema in Australia: A Documented History,* UNSW Press, Kensington Sydney, 1989, pp. 74-5
6 *Report of the Royal Commission on the Moving Picture Industry in Australia,* H J Green (Government Printer), Canberra, 1928, p. 168.
7 *Report of the Royal Commission,* pp. 936-7.
8 Graham Shirley, 'McDonaghs of Australian Cinema', *Filmsnews,* Dec. 1978, p. 5.
9 Joan Long, 'Part I of a Historical Survey of Women in Australia', *Cinema Papers,* June-July 1976, p. 37.
10 Shirley, 'McDonaghs of Australian Cinema', p. 15.
11 Shirley, 'McDonaghs of Australian Cinema', p. 15.
12 McDonagh Sisters — Documention (Scrap Books). Clippings Folder National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), p. 5.
13 Interview: Graham Shirley with Neville Macken, 7 Aug. 1971. Cover No. 227531, NFSA.
14 Long, 'Part I', p. 89.
15 Shirley, 'McDonaghs of Australian Cinema', p. 17.
16 Interview (Shirley with Macken).
17 Interview (Shirley with Macken).
18 The same claim, however, could not be made for Slessor's nasty article for *Smith's Weekly,* published several years later in August 1936, entitled 'It's Up to Our Black Shirts Now! Australia's Black Hopes to the Rescue- Lessons from the Berlin Olympic Games Applied to Australia' *(Smith's Weekly,* 15 Aug. 1936, p. 6). All the ugly, destructive stereotypes about Aboriginal people emerge here. writ large.
19 Geoffry Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor: A Biography,* Viking, Ringwood (Victoria), 1991, p. 114.
20 See, for example, 28 Jan., 11 Feb. and 15 Apr. 1933.
21 Dutton, *Kenneth Slessor,* p. 132.
22 See, for example, Adrian Caesar, *Kenneth Slessor,* OUP, Melbourne, 1995.
23 Kenneth Slessor, *Collected Poems* (ed. Dennis Haskell and Geoffrey Dutton), Angus and Robertson, Pymble, Sydney, 1992, p. 304.
24 *Bradman Scrapbook.*
25 Pollard, *Complete Illustrated History,* pp. 270-1.
26 C J Graves, 'Pike Says Whipping Horses Went Out With Straw Hats', *Referee.* 11 Sept. 1931.
27 *Sun-Herald,* 24 Apr. 1977. A copy of this article (by Barbara Muhvich and entitled 'She Helped to Put Us on the Film Map') is held in the McDonagh Sisters — Documentation (Scrap Books), Untitled Folder, NFSA.