

A Tale of Two Concepts

ROBERT WINTER*

The art of the filmmaker is to create the illusion of reality within the artistic limitations of the possible. To bring together subject matter, location, distribution, financing, music, and the demands of a director so that an illusion is created is (it is felt within the industry) indeed a kind of art. The re-creation of the Australian outback in the earlier nineteenth century, with all its hardships, and the need to show governance in a new colony in the British Empire, tested the honesty of filmmakers in their quest for truth about this period.

This is a tale of two concepts, two ambitions, bringing to British screens the energy of far away communities evolving differently from their European contemporaries. Early emigrants struggled for survival, developing in the process a culture of enterprise and self-reliance and bringing to Australia a different attitude to European authority. For those familiar with my earlier lecture on Ealing Studios comedies, *The Tip of the Iceberg*,¹ this will be an extension of that account of Ealing's productions to their filming in Australia; together with an account of Yorkshire Television's filming of the historical series *Luke's Kingdom*. It will also include some historical background for the two companies. I will illustrate with video clips the risks these companies took out here in order to compare their productions, separated by a quarter of a century. If the situation were reversed, with Australian companies going to Canada, South Africa, or even England, and setting up bases to make drama productions

* *Robert Winter has been associated with the film and television industries since the mid-1930s. He joined Ealing Studios in 1942 and became a founding member of Yorkshire Television in 1967. He is a graduate of the University of Sydney.*

about those countries during the nineteenth century, it would certainly be challenging, there would be abundant scepticism, and the financial support for such ventures would be doubted.

Ealing In Australia

For Ealing, embarking on its first overseas production enterprise, when it was achieving notable success with its comedies (*Kind Hearts and Coronets*, *Whiskey Galore*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*), was a remarkable stab in the dark. It says much for Michael Balcon's vision of energetic drama under the Ealing banner. Harry Watt was a well-known documentary director (he had assisted Robert Flaherty on *Man of Arran* and went on to direct the *March of Time* series, *Britain at Bay*, and many other features before joining Ealing). With this background, Watt was asked by Balcon to explore suitable subjects in Australia which would fit under the Ealing umbrella. After some six months research in Australia by Watt, Balcon asked him to take a step further into a different kind of drama. To this end, in 1946 Ealing took a lease out on Pagewood Studios at Randwick, which had been closed for a decade, at a cost of over £200,000. Pagewood was gradually turned into a fully equipped studio, with the idea that a British investment could resuscitate a languishing Australian film industry. Watt followed Chauvel's *Rats of Tobruk* in 1944 with *Overlanders*, and Ealing became the first English company to produce films in Australia on a regular basis after the war. Balcon embarked on five films here with story lines that were an important commentary on Australia's social and cultural history: 1946 *Overlanders*, 1949 *Eureka Stockade*, 1950 *Bitter Springs*, 1957 *The Shiralee*, 1959 *Siege of Pinchgut*.

Canberra complained that the Australian war effort was not being sufficiently publicised. The complaint was met by *Overlanders*. This was about the early 1940s, when the Japanese planned invasion. In a great trek, Australian cattleman Don McAlpine moved hundreds of precious cattle south across the continent when the Japanese threat promised to become a reality.

This film had all the stuff of Australians expecting war. The Australian government provided Ealing with transport and hundreds of Army personnel, and did more for Ealing than for any other local producer. Eighty per cent of the film was shot on location around Alice Springs and the Roper River. Elizabeth Webby's presentation of *Overlanders* [see accompanying article] illustrates the prevailing attitudes of the settlers to the aborigines, together with the cinematic concepts at the time. It was a man's world, divorced from many of today's pseudo-romantic liaisons.

Communication with film crews on difficult locations in the days before fax, internet and mobile telephones, with a time difference as well as currency fluctuations, affected Watt's management of filming such important historical events. Back in London, these matters were to influence future expenditure on Ealing's choice of subject matter. Balcon's quest for Australian historical accuracy and the educated approach by Ealing's management, particularly in those drama productions needing an in-depth approach to the subject matter, I believe are sufficiently well known not to need amplification.

Eureka Stockade, an excerpt from which follows, is the story of an armed clash between the goldminers, the police and the militia at the Eureka Stockade in Ballarat in 1854. The clash cost the lives of 20 miners and five soldiers, with many more wounded. It was importantly about the morality of mining licenses and the paper rights of many settlers who, having paid for rights to the land, demanded that these rights be honoured. The film centres on four settlers in Ballarat, headed by Peter Lalor, fighting an officious police force acting on behalf of a burdensome Governor who introduced mining licenses in an effort to stop the flood of farmers, shepherds, storekeepers and others who were deserting the land in their feverish pursuit of gold. The police fail in their attempts to force the miners off and the militia is brought in to support the police. The miners are arrested, but public opinion at that time swung behind them. Juries refused to convict the miners and reforms in the goldfields were put into effect. The miners' rejection of government authority and the creation of

the Southern Cross flag by them gave the incident not only a symbolic significance, but a national identity for Australian democracy yet to come.

Eureka Stockade: the miners burn their licences and police and militia are brought in to bring the settlers to heel: 7.43 min.

Ealing leaving Australia

In closing Denham Studios in the early 1950s, John Davis, CEO of the Rank Organisation, distributors of Ealing Films and financial guarantors, obliged Balcon to close down the Australian adventure. This closure was accelerated by the British Government's announcing a punitive tax on foreign films. Films made by Ealing in Australia could only count as British productions if, when imported, they employed a greater proportion of English than of Australian artists and technicians. On advice from Davis, Canberra decided not to extend the lease of Pagewood to Ealing. Davis did not consider it necessary to make pictures in Australia when studios in the UK were experiencing the worst crisis in British film history, with scores of cinemas and production companies closing down together with many important studios, including Ealing, during the dawn of television.

The Long Arm was the last film Balcon produced at Ealing. The Studios were sold to the BBC for £350,000. John Davis said that two new stages were to be built at Pinewood for Ealing's exclusive use. When the time came, however, Ealing would have to take its chance along with other producers. Balcon did not want to be compromised, and resigned from Rank and MGM's Boards. Some of Ealing's staff went to MGM, but little of the old spirit went with them. Balcon said that it was the people who counted, but admitted Ealing had developed a spirit that seeped into the very fabric of the buildings. The Associated British Picture

Corporation made an offer for Ealing's assets (primarily film titles). Balcon said the members of the team were interchangeable, no one specialised in comedies alone. Directors were expected to contribute to other genres. I believe that this produced the quintessential Ealing style, apparent even in their Australian productions. All were all involved in the spirited studio output.

Resurgence: Ealing and Yorkshire Television

I assume little is known in Australia about Ealing and about the world's largest television studios (formally blessed by the British Prime Minister in 1997), and digress so that a comparison between Ealing's venture here and Yorkshire Television's, with a time interval of 25 years, can readily be made.

Ealing is now the oldest studio in the world (it was built in 1902), and is currently spending some hundred million dollars in modernisation. Already *The Importance of Being Earnest* (a period production) has been filmed and exhibited, with several other films in the pipeline to be made in the distinctive British style of movie production. In the past, both Ealing and Yorkshire Television had made period films with social comment. For Ealing in 1944, it was *Champagne Charlie*, a bawdy Victorian musical set in the 1830s about the rivalry between competing music halls of the day. For Yorkshire Television in 1968, it was *Tom Grattan's War*, set in the 1914–18 war, the first film drama series for the company.

In the 1960s, without a TV station there was no facility for Yorkshire people to have an independent identity or a voice (in contemporary terms), although an important sense of county identity was much in evidence with the *Yorkshire Post* newspaper. All programming beamed to the Yorkshire area emanated either from the BBC, the Granada TV Network in Lancashire (unsatisfactory to Yorkshire people), or from ATV in Birmingham and other smaller independent networks. The Independent Broadcasting Authority's criterion for a new TV station was that it had to have relevance to community needs. It had to have

current affairs, daily local news, and educational programmes, as well as national and international documentaries. Further, it had to have consistency of technical transmission when the UK was about to go into colour telecasting, with a constant flow of high quality programming. Creative, technical, and skilled management was pretty well non-existent in the designated area of transmission.

Yorkshire Television was granted a licence by the IBA on 11 June 1967, with the station designed for colour transmission. The first pile was put down in August 1967 and interviewing of staff started between the end of 1967 and the early part of 1968. The early facilities for production in drama, news, education and sports programmes were established by fifteen key production staff during this phase. The advantage for Yorkshire was that we were starting from scratch, bringing with us the best know-how from the companies that most of us had worked for, jettisoning in the process over-burdening red tape from the BBC. There was a great urge to succeed.

At the Yorkshire TV base in Leeds, ENG cameras were being experimented with for news gathering. The editing of studio based drama by hand on two-inch Ampex machines was technically cumbersome, primitive, and visually not very good. Film fundamentally was to be the prime source of transmission material, with the newsreader or link-man operating from a very small studio. The objective was to get up and running and on air, from what was to become a new major television station, in six months, with the construction of many facilities still in a wet concrete form. (Today, we take programmes to air from whatever the source, and they seem to have always been there, rather like tap water.) Yorkshire's immediate concerns were to film local hard news on film, send it physically down to London for processing, and have it brought back to Leeds, edited, and transmitted within the space of 24 hours.

During the early days of experimental run-up to the transmission date in July 1968, when technical resources and personnel were phased out of London, staff, artists, creative talent and those

with specialised technical expertise had to be brought to Leeds, accommodation sought, and people housed. This created logistical, personal and shooting problems. These problems were further exacerbated after the ice-laden transmission mast at Emley Moor fell down in February 1969, disrupting both transmission and income. A temporary mast was brought from Norway to restore transmission. For families, the shock during this period of lost advertising revenue, the possibility of having to find another job, and accommodation and schools elsewhere, was devastating.

An important consideration for television is that major financing for all programming pretty much comes out of the advertising revenue cake. During this formative period Yorkshire had to cajole local as well as national advertisers to buy air time without their knowing just what sorts of programmes their advertisements would be coupled with. There was no past record, just an accelerating level of debt from building, buying equipment, overheads, payments to move staff, and servicing shareholders from a public float. The task seemed insuperable. What we did have was a mountain of enthusiasm from all around, and the support of proud Yorkshire people. They had their own television station, and no longer had to have programmes or news coming from the other side of the Pennines.

Yorkshire Television was incorporated into Trident Television in November 1970, although the name was retained. Trident TV was to acquire Halas and Batchelor (well known for their cartoons), Tyne Tees Television Company, Scarborough Zoo, Windsor Safari Park, Trident Casinos, Playboy Club, Watts & Cory Scenery, Victoria Casino, The Clermont Club, as well as Trident Holdings (Australia Pty Ltd) and several other companies, some Swiss based. Yorkshire TV had world-wide contracts and a cash flow for its productions. Granada Television has now taken over a controlling interest in Yorkshire.

Why come to Australia?

During the early 1970s, Yorkshire TV had a regional audience

of over eight million viewers, and some sixteen million viewers on a nationally networked basis. Some six years later, a history of successful drama television series—for example *The Brontes of Haworth*, *A Touch of Frost*, *Heartbeat*, *Follyfoot*—and the investigative journalism of contemporary world leaders by Alan Whicker, indicated that the company was well placed to undertake a serious attempt to re-enact events taking place in Australia in the nineteenth century. Then, settlers were motivated to move beyond the nineteen counties (about 150 kilometres from Sydney, including the coastal plains and the military depot at Bathurst), feeling free to develop the land beyond the jurisdiction of the Government of the day.

In 1974 when two of us were to come to Australia to set up a base at Neutral Bay to shoot *Luke's Kingdom* (set in the 1830s) in conjunction with Channel Nine and ZDF in Germany, our organisational experience and expertise in setting up Yorkshire TV was a fundamental advantage in producing this series. It was to be the flagship launching Channel Nine into colour transmission in 1975. The principal location at Smoky Dawson's ranch at Ingleside was turned into an outpost of the period. A village store, jail house, blacksmith's forge, flogging triangle, and other buildings, costing over a quarter million dollars, were reconstructed in the materials of the time.

Yorkshire at that time was unaware of pending wage award increases for technicians in Australia not under its direct control. Our production budgets for the series consequently went out of the window and our associates ZDF and Channel Nine could not be called upon to meet overages. Relationships at that time became severely strained.

When budgeting took place in the UK a reasonable run of good weather during summer months was predicted and expected. However when shooting started in February 1974, the weather made a capricious destruction of the budget. Almost three weeks of continuous rain fell, with all the cost implications for wardrobe, make-up, schedules, and with the consequent disenchantment of everyone concerned. The ramifications and consequences of

shooting in Australia became abundantly clear back in England: flash floods marooning generators and equipment, the renting of sheep (which we should have bought outright) and of a Brahma bull (a leading character in one of the episodes) which was bitten by a snake and died, were to cause alarm with the board of directors in the UK. All this was coupled with a home based view that as it was fundamentally a Yorkshire TV based and financed concept then Yorkshire crews, artists, writers, and directors should play the dominant part in any down under major historical drama series.

Filming the period

The scenarios for Ealing's *Eureka Stockade* and Yorkshire's *Luke's Kingdom* were set in the middle decades of Australia's nineteenth century. It is against the historical background of the times in England and Australia that both Ealing and Yorkshire decided to range some ten thousand miles to capture the Australian realities of those times on film. The filming experiences of the two different companies twenty five years apart bring out some important aspects of the problems faced by both in shooting in an inhospitable environment, with a shortage of highly experienced technical and artistic talent, equipment, and in some areas non-existent support systems, in bringing to the screen the violent realities.

Creative concepts and technical difficulties

Both companies had been familiar in the UK with first-rate facilities not more than 200 miles away. The contrast in Australia, coupled with different methods of financing and production, affected the artistic merit, structure, and sometimes content in the final outcomes of their respective endeavours.

For Yorkshire Television, in a climate in which Tim Burstall had recently made *Alvin Purple* and Peter Weir had completed *The Cars that Ate Paris*, Elizabeth Kata (author of *Patch of Blue*) was commissioned to write two episodes of *Luke's Kingdom*,

which Weir was to direct. These were focussed on the ugliness and the contempt for human suffering in the period. There was a distinct difference from Harry Watt's semi-documentary approach in *Eureka Stockade*, and Weir, later to encapsulate the terrifying torture of the era, translated into film scenes that Kata wrote for the 'The Dam and the Damned' episode, producing a new dynamic tension and a realism for the period. (The episode deals with the deaths of many convicts, already suffering extreme punishment, who had to build a dam to store water for the settlers.) This was quite different from the gentler Ealing style.

Setting up a base and filming abroad requires know-how about local union agreements, immigration visas, work permits, customs and excise for equipment and wardrobe, special artists' contracts to cover over-runs and post-syncing, and knowledge of a variety of insurances. There were of course language problems, both written and oral, between the ZDF, YTV and Channel Nine partners to the agreement. Taxation for overseas crews, tax relief for film makers, export of earnings etc. were all part of pre-production planning.

In managing the thirteen episodes of *Luke's Kingdom*, consistency of performance of the series from one director to another was crucial in the establishment and credibility of the characters. This was important for the artists, inasmuch as directors were expected to share with the artists an acceptance of the characters already established. Different approaches by different directors compromise concepts and interfere with the created character. Unevenness in performance follows, and time spent in discussions on how one director sees the film differently from another makes for intervention; and it is often too late on seeing rushes to re-shoot. Heat, rain, snakes and mosquitoes, facilities or their absence, relations of technicians and talent, and incentives for unions when difficult conditions are encountered, add further burdens.

Daunting as the prospects were, the early days at Yorkshire Television were to stand it in good stead on coming to Australia. Channel Nine's need in 1975 was to have a flagship to go to air

for their colour transmission. Nine felt at that time that an Australian historical series, *Luke's Kingdom*, was the ideal vehicle. For Nine it was an expression of confidence in the future, emanating from Australia's earlier days of hardships and deprivations. The intention was to give an insight into the land conditions the settlers would have experienced in the 1830s—land that some thought stretched as far as China. For Yorkshire, it meant firstly, a totally different fare for the audience in our transmission area; secondly, a production base in Australia to make further off-beat productions; and thirdly, the opportunity to set up the Trident Television Rental Company.

Luke's Kingdom

The series is an untold story of courage. There is an attractive moment in Australian history when it seemed life paused, took a breath as it were. Dependence upon the penal settlement had all but gone. The massive overland drives into the forbidding outback had yet to begin. In 1831, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Goodriche, announced that all free grants of land would cease forthwith. But outside the authorised limits, men made their own rules, fighting out the battles of their boundaries with rifles, stock whips and stirrup irons. They fought also every kind of natural hazard—drought, disease in livestock, distances—and depression. Life for the settlers was a mixture of delight, gruelling work, and isolation from law and order. They built attractive homesteads, sometimes in the tradition of home. Our series was about Jason Firbeck's family, sheep farmers from Yorkshire, caught up in the English wool depression and sailing to Australia during Lord Goodriche's declaration with a grant of 3000 acres of land. The land was uncharted and their piece of paper worthless.

*Luke's Kingdom: 'Arrival' and
'Massacre at Myall Creek': 10.23 min.*

What was Peter Weir's contribution? An Australian perspective and a concept of the settlers' conditions and agony. A visual representation of survival, not in contemporary terms but with a total recognition of the period. This included decaying bodies, even death itself, and the pervasive endurance of the family. It showed the corruption of the military and the trade-offs; drought, and its capability of wiping out a year's hard work, taking with it livestock and crops and bringing in its wake malnutrition, disease and extinction. It showed a new colony, chained to survival and bastardry.

Luke's Kingdom: 'The Dam and the Dammed': 8 min.

Trident however pulled out of Australia, for reasons of production over-run costs, financing of the leasing of colour sets from Dutch Phillips, and an embargo on the transmission of the finished series for one year back in the UK. *Luke's Kingdom* was considered a run-away series not using UK crews, and became all but disaster back in the England.

Nevertheless these two concepts, from Ealing and from Yorkshire Television, are microcosms of Australian history by two very different companies, and show how rich is the material available to the film maker. The Ealing approach was to see the period from the point of view of the 1950s in England, in the differing story lines of *Eureka Stockade*, *The Shiralee*, and *The Overlanders*. The approach of the Yorkshire Television series was grimmer, and much more realistic. But in either case, travelling such distances for such undertakings, I believe, enables new perspectives, fresh eyes for a little filmed part of Australian history, rather than perhaps xenophobic approaches. I believe that these different visual approaches were, in their own ways, successful.

Notes

- 1 In *Arts, the Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association* 24 (2002): 115–27.

References

- Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, 'Ealing Film Studios in Australia', *Australian Cinema, the first Eighty Years*, Sydney, 1989.
- The First Australian History & Film Conference papers*, ed. Anne Hutton, North Ryde, Sydney, 1982.
- George Perry, *George Perry Presents Forever Ealing*, London, 1981.