

Wizards of Oz: survivals, losses and finds in Australian film history

Ray Edmondson

Among the Collectors

I do not think there is any thrill in film archiving which matches the finding of an important “lost” film. Without wanting to sound melodramatic, the comparisons which most readily come to mind are the Egyptologist stumbling across an ancient, unlooted tomb in the Valley of the Kings, or young Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver striking it rich on Treasure Island. (Visions of a cackling Robert Newton drooling over a stack of newly unearthed cans don’t seem entirely incongruous. “Arrrh now, Ray lad, what precious gems awaits us ‘ere, then, eh?” he exclaims, and applies the tip of his cutlass to lever off a rusty lid ...)

From the time in 1968 when I first joined the NFSA’s predecessor – the embryonic film archive within the National Library of Australia – the archaeology of Australia’s film history was a gradually unfolding and endlessly intriguing journey of discovery. Of the history of the Australian industry during the nitrate era, little had then been documented. But there was already a collection of several hundred titles, serious research was beginning, and many of the industry’s important pioneers were still living.

As I was to discover, the network of film collectors was vibrant, active and – of course – appropriately secretive. Many were passionate individuals whose hobbies cost them dear. Their private 35mm cinemas – perhaps a converted garage or lounge – could not be cheaply constructed. Their collections filled available space – sheds, garages, spare rooms. Because of the flammability of the films, they were understandably circumspect about advertising their enthusiasms to their neighbours or their insurance company. Where the house was shared with a wife and children (collectors were almost always male) they had often to extend a good deal of tolerance to Dad’s enthusiasm!

In time, I found myself welcomed into their world. I was privileged to be so treated, because as a government-employed archivist rather than a private accumulator I represented the suspect hand of “officialdom”. It needs to be remembered that any large private 35mm collection was composed, at least in part, of films that were technically “stolen property” – that is, of prints that had been officially, if not actually, junked. They had found their way into private hands by informal means, and the commercial film distributors from whom they had been sourced – who, among other things, were fearful of piracy – understandably frowned on the practice. Sometimes actively so: stories of distributor-instigated police “raids” on private collections were part of the rich apocrypha of the collector network, which abounded in yarns of finds, one-upmanship, and skulduggery at the expense of distributors or laboratory proprietors. (At the same time, I suspect the “thrill” of possessing illicit materials was actually, for some, part of the attraction of collecting.)

The stories are legion, but that of the mysterious and unnamed “Chinese Gentleman” will illustrate. In Australia at the time, 35mm prints were usually shipped to country cinemas by

train – a programme would be booked for sequential play dates in a series of theatres in towns strung out along a railway line. It would “move down the line” to each of them in turn. The prints would be delivered a day or so in advance of each screening, the film trunks being plonked by the train guard on the platform to await collection by the cinema operator. There was a good deal of informality and trust involved – as I can recall from my own observation as a child, the trunks (heavy metal containers holding several reels of nitrate film) might sit on the station platform in the blazing sun for many hours, till the recipient got round to collecting them.

Enter the “Chinese Gentleman”. He apparently had an arrangement with one – or more – station clerks in situations where this natural delay could work to his advantage. He would “borrow” a print for several hours, long enough to run off a dupe negative, and return it before the recipient came to claim it. The negative could then yield any number of “pirate” prints whose use – within Australia or beyond – can only be guessed at. One imagines that Mr Gentleman had his own private printing and processing laboratory – an entirely practical possibility in the days of black and white film. (I knew collectors who had their own film printers – the most important item of equipment, since the processing of film could be readily contracted out.)

Of course, the means by which collectors obtained their prints tended to fall into three categories. The first was genuine finds in unlikely places, such as old cinema projection rooms, or second-hand shops. The second was by exchange: swaps and horse trading among fellow collectors. The third was “informal” acquisition from a distributor.

Of the latter means, I never met any collector who admitted to directly participating in this approach – but everyone knew that it happened! Hypothetically, collector Jones would know despatch clerk Smith at the Stupendous Film Company’s exchange. Smith had been instructed to destroy a quantity of surplus prints and legally certify that this has been done. He casually mentioned this to Jones, who happily was able to oblige by offering to carry out this task himself. The following day, Jones arrived with his car and Smith dumped the prints in his boot. Smith could now formally write them off, while Jones – who, it transpired, was not always well organised – might sometimes forget to carry out the destruction. Variations on this theme were legion, and despite the official stances of many film companies, there was – at least some of the time – evident tolerance of the inevitable. Collectors would take the private view that, so long as no piracy was occurring and the distributor’s income was not affected, the practice caused no harm and indeed, over time, conferred benefit by contributing to the survival of films.

Over the years I got to know many collectors whose holdings, and whose vigilance, yielded unique copies of Australian nitrate films that found their way into our Archive. These included silent feature films like Franklyn Barrett’s *The Breaking of the Drought* (1920), the second film version of the literary classic *Robbery Under Arms* (1920), the daring Raymond Longford feature *The Woman Suffers (while the man goes free)* (1918), Beaumont Smith’s *The Adventures of Algy* (1925), and comedian Pat Hanna’s *Waltzing Matilda* (1934). Just as importantly, there were countless newsreels, documentaries and advertising films which survived solely in private collections.

Collectors value their privacy but I will mention two, both now dead, whom I think would be happy to be remembered in this context. John Scanes (the source of *Robbery Under Arms*) was an extraordinarily generous man who kept his collection, and his projection set-up, in his garage in an outer Sydney suburb. He alerted me whenever his activities turned up an interesting Australian title, and this usually resulted in the reels being added to the Archive’s collection. He made me a welcome visitor to his home, and we would sometimes spend hours

sifting through parts of his collection. Stacked in piles in his garage, each inviting can label might lead to a background story, an examination on a rewriter or occasionally putting something up on the screen. When we had room, I offered to store some of his nitrate in our vault in Canberra: many of his unique films of European and American origin, some going back almost to the turn of the century, were progressively repatriated to archives in their country of origin.

Harry Davidson was perhaps Melbourne's best known film collector. He had two collections: the first was lost in a house fire sometime in the 1950s or 1960s (he was never precise about the date). He started over and built a second, and his home was a temple to his love of the movies: statuettes and relics from demolished theatres were sprinkled around the house, jostling for space with the film cans and memorabilia stacked in rooms and hallways, and the characteristic smell of nitrate film (and I confess that it is a smell I love) was everywhere. Harry guarded his collection jealously, but in the early 1970s he finally relented and lent me his precious print of *The Exploits of the Emden* (1928) for copying, on my assurances that it would be perfectly safe and returned to him promptly. The print was already showing signs of decomposition, and I sent it for proprietary scratch removal treatment before copying. Unexpectedly, the treatment reacted with the stock and advanced the deterioration. *I hadn't kept my promise*. It was years before Harry's trust was recovered and he again gave us access.

In about 1980, Harry died suddenly, leaving his widow Pat, and his infant daughter Theda. We were able to purchase his collection of over 2000 reels. Many of its considerable riches – which included a tinted print of *Metropolis* and unique copies of some of Harold Lloyd's earliest work – have since been distributed to archives across the globe as part of the NFSA nitrate repatriation program of the 1990s. In every case, the accepting archives undertook to identify the material in their records as being part of the "Harry Davidson Collection". This honoured our original conditions of acquisition and also celebrated Harry's achievement – and legacy – as a collector.

While film archives often have the financial means, mostly unavailable to private individuals, to copy, properly store and preserve nitrate film, it is more often than not the collector who has the time, contacts and inclination to find the material in the first place. It is a partnership, though the collector's role is often unsung – and many collectors like it that way. But the partnership depends on personal relationships, involving mutual respect, a shared love of old film, and a willingness to accept the moral obligations which come from being invited into – and perhaps ultimately assuming responsibility for – a private world, the product of a lifetime of passion and persistence.

Some of the Ones that Got Away

Australia's "big three" silent film directors – Raymond Longford, Franklyn Barrett and Beaumont Smith – were prolific, each completing over 20 feature films during their careers. Tragically, only remnants of their work now remain.

Of Longford's work, only his acknowledged masterpiece, *The Sentimental Bloke*, survives intact (see below). Substantial, though incomplete or shortened, versions of three other films exist, along with fragments of two more. Longford worked for a series of companies between 1910 and 1934, and did not always have either copyright or physical control of his films. They were held in a variety of hands and survival has proved largely a matter of chance.

Franklyn Barrett likewise worked for a variety of producers, later setting up his own production company, and making his last film – *A Rough Passage* – in 1922. Only two of his films – *The Breaking of the Drought* and *A Girl of the Bush*, both from 1920 – survive. For

many years he appears to have kept his prints and negatives in his garage, and in the 1950s tried to awaken institutional interest in their preservation. But before any progress could be made, his garage structurally collapsed; the films, along with the rest of the contents, were carted away as debris.

From the outset, Beaumont Smith operated his own production company, making his first film in 1917 and his last in 1934. Three of his features, and a fragment of a fourth, are left to us. That we do not have his entire output is a result of timing and circumstance. Upon Smith's death in 1950, his brother inherited his surviving stock of films and retained them for many years. But a chance discussion with someone from his local fire brigade alerted him to both the practical and insurance dangers of keeping a large stock of flammable nitrate film in his home or garage. On advice, he consented to the destruction of the entire stock by the fire authorities. The National Library, then beginning a search for nitrate film by writing to every fire brigade in Australia, tracked Mr Smith down - just six months too late. Only a fragment - several minutes of the 1924 film *The Digger Earl* - had been overlooked in the purge. It was only in later years that complete copies of one of Smith's silents, and both of his talkies, were tracked down from other sources.

Four Finds

(1) National Films, Fatty Finn and Charlie Chaplin

National Films of New South Wales was a small, independent distribution company owned by showman Gerry Tayler. For many years, until around 1960, it occupied top-storey offices in Pitt Street, the heart of Sydney's central business district. Their film vaults, containing thousands of reels of nitrate film, adjoined the offices: though they were never known to have a mishap, one can speculate that a nitrate fire would have turned the building into an interesting variation on the roman candle!

As an independent in an industry dominated by a small number of major, overseas-owned companies, National worked in the margins, supplying city independents, country exhibitors, and specialist users. Their inventory included American product like the "Joe Palooka" series, various Australian features and short subjects, and even some silent material handed down by the majors after the advent of talkies. National regularly serviced Sydney's five newsreel theatrettes with elderly silent comic shorts - by the 1950s, the only place where one was likely to see such material on 35mm. As a schoolboy, I was a regular frequenter of the newsreel theatrettes and among other things, over the years, they were where I first saw several of Chaplin's Mutual shorts - all of them, I later learned, part of the series reissued (with music) by the Van Bueren studio in the 1930s, and emanating from National Films.

Another 1950s frequenter of the newsreel theatrettes (whom I was to meet much later in life) was John Morris, a student at Sydney University and keen member of its Film Group. On one occasion, he was intrigued by a silent offering which featured the antics of some Sydney children. He tracked the print to its source - National Films - and established that it was a segment of a 1927 comedy feature called *The Kid Stakes*, based on a popular comic strip called *Fatty Finn*. Morris established that National had long ago inherited three prints of the film, which they had subsequently cut up to make 20-minute fillers for the newsreel programs. The quality of the film impressed him, and he wanted to take the matter further.

With the backing of the Film Group and the cooperation (and, one suspects, bemusement) of Gerry Tayler, Morris set about reconstructing the best complete copy of the feature he could piece together from the surviving cut down segments. In order to make new prints, a negative had to be struck, and this was initially bankrolled by the Film Group - until the project attracted sufficient interest in the press for the National Library to be persuaded (Morris says

“shamed”!) to back it. Today *The Kid Stakes* is a classic, recognised as one of Australia’s best silent features, and John Morris’s reconstruction has never been improved on.

Morris went on to a diverse and impressive career as a film producer and executive, running the South Australian Film Corporation in its 1970s heyday, and finally heading the Australian Film Finance Corporation until his recent retirement. In late 1999, a new cinema complex in Sydney was opened with a screening of *The Kid Stakes* supported by a live orchestral accompaniment. On that occasion, when John Morris stood up and “took a bow”, his pioneering work as a film restorer was publicly recognised for the first time, nearly 50 years after the event.

National Films’ story has other strands. When Gerry Tayler died and the company folded, his widow Dorothy inherited its stock in trade of nitrate film, which was relocated out of the Pitt Street premises – no doubt to the landlord’s relief – to wherever it would fit in her house. Dorothy spent her twilight years carefully repairing, recanning and disposing of this inventory. Much of it came to us at the National Library, and in the 1960s I became a regular visitor to her small weatherboard home in one of Sydney’s seaside suburbs. She had constructed a rudimentary examination bench, using a few old LP records as winding plates, and she checked and identified material before putting it into newly painted cans (she did the painting herself – it lengthened the life of the can). On each visit I collected a consignment of film to take back to Canberra in my car, and the “Tayler Collection” steadily grew.

Among the inventory was a set of dupe negatives and prints of the Mutual Chaplins, mentioned above, which Dorothy offered to us. With a heavy but very rational heart, I had to reject the offer on the grounds that we did not then have the means or manpower to look after them, and that logically they should be offered to an American archive. I facilitated a contact with the American Film Institute to whom they were ultimately sent. According to the AFI at the time, they turned out to be the best surviving negatives of the Chaplin Mutuals.

(2) *The Flying Doctor*

In 1936 a company called National Productions, backed by Gaumont-British and linked to the new National Studios complex in Sydney, was established to make international productions in Australia. Their first – and, as it turned out, only – film was *The Flying Doctor*, made by British director Miles Mander and starring American matinee idol Charles Farrell. The storyline was built around the famous service which provides medical care in Australia’s outback, and included interesting ingredients like a cameo role for cricketer Don Bradman, then at the height of his fame. The film was released in Australia and Britain but proved only a modest success, and eventually dropped from sight. By the mid 1970s, when it figured on a list of titles for which our Archive was searching, no copies were known to exist.

One day, workmen in the Sydney suburb of Lane Cove were clearing a new building site. An early task was to demolish a small pillbox structure with steel doors, which stood in the way of the new building. Unable to open them by other means, a workman cut through the steel doors with an oxy-acetylene torch, revealing an interior stacked with hundreds of cans of what turned out to be nitrate film. Along with other site refuse, the cans were loaded onto a truck and sent off to the nearest rubbish tip.

As the truck passed the offices of the local Council, an alert staff member noticed what it was carrying, and immediately rushed out and gave chase in his car. Reaching the rubbish tip, he persuaded the driver to stack the cans in a safe place and contacted Film Australia, a government film production unit located in the nearby suburb of Lindfield. They in turn contacted the National Library, and the film was ultimately transferred into the National Film Archive collection.

Among other things, it yielded a nitrate release print of *The Flying Doctor*. Delighted and intrigued, I sat down to preview the print on an Intercine. It was good, involving stuff. But as the story neared an insoluble crisis point at the end of reel 8, it ran out. That was it. The last reel was missing!

For two years I wondered how the story ended! Then, unexpectedly, a routine search list sent to the National Film Archive in London - while drawing a blank on all the other titles - turned up a print of *The Flying Doctor* at Rank, who proved happy to donate it to us. Finally, I'd get to see the last reel! The box arrived. I unpacked it. To my dismay the Rank copy, too, was only 8 reels long. I worked through it on the Intercine. Clearly it was the same film, but it had been radically rearranged and shortened: the middle and opening sections had been swapped around, and other changes made. I worried till I got to the end of reel 7, which cut off at ... precisely the same point as reel 8 in the "Lane Cove" print! So the final reel would serve as common to both versions! Came the big moment: reel 8 unfolded, and at last I knew how the story ended!

Why were there two versions? This was actually the fate of many Australian features in the nitrate years - and beyond. Released as "A" films at home, they would often end up as "B" pictures in Britain or America - if they got a release there at all. The original negative would be sent for printing to the overseas distributor, who would often recut and/or retitle the film to enhance its marketability. (So *The Adorable Outcast* became *White Cargo*, *On Our Selection* became *Down on the Farm*, *Walk into Paradise* turned into *Walk into Hell*, *Forty Thousand Horsemen* became *Thunder over the Desert*.) The negative, and the trims, would never return to Australia - it was not worth the shipping cost - and would often, in time, be lost. Production budgets were usually too slim to allow for lavenders or other protection copies to be made for safekeeping at home: the original release prints would serve out the economic life of the film. No one anticipated future sales to something called television.

There is a postscript to this story. Years later, a travelling exhibition of stills from our collection, on show at a Sydney art gallery, brought a surprise present. As a kind donation, someone handed over the official studio stills book of *The Flying Doctor*, picked up at a suburban second hand shop. A remarkable chain of coincidence had given us back not only both versions of the film, but a complete coverage of its stills. Truly a happy ending.

What's that? I haven't revealed what happens in the last reel? Sorry, but I don't want to spoil the film for you if you still haven't seen it. We could always sell you a video ...

(3) Ned Kelly

Hanged in 1880, the iron-clad bushranger Ned Kelly had, within two decades of his death, acquired celebrity status as a symbol of courage and anti-authoritarianism. Commemorated first in stage plays, and later in works such as the paintings of Sir Sidney Nolan, he has long since become a national Australian icon. It's perhaps no surprise that he has been the subject of (to date) seven feature films, all of which survive in whole or in part. The first of these, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, made in 1906, is of crucial importance because it arguably represents the first appearance in the world of the modern feature film concept. A cinematic drama running somewhere between 40 and 80 minutes (there is no exact record) and occupying the entire program, it was a major commercial success, screening in Australia, New Zealand and Britain. It was made in Melbourne, and to save expense the producers even persuaded the police to lend them Ned Kelly's actual armour for the actor to wear in the film.

Until the mid 1970s, however, no trace of the film was known to survive. We were fortunate to acquire a copy of the original programme booklet, which contained a detailed story

synopsis and reproductions of stills from the film. But there was no actual footage ...

One day I was idly sifting through a can of short nitrate film clips that had arrived as part of a small collection. My eye was caught by a clip of about ten frames with almost square perforations. It was someone dressed in Ned Kelly's characteristic armour. I looked in the can for more: there were two more similarly brief snippets. I checked them against the stills in the programme booklet. There was no doubt – I had in my hand about two feet of the original Kelly film. It was not much, but it was something at last. It was a moment I shall never forget.

We had those snippets copied – in both real time and stretched – so at last we had a tantalising glimpse of the film to show. Would we ever see any more?

In June 1979, I was contacted by a Melbourne school principal, Ken Robb. Rummaging through the effects of a deceased estate, he had come across a can of negative film which had apparently been found under the floorboards of a house. When printed, it was possible to identify the reel as comprising two scenes from the Kelly film: possibly uncut outtakes, the scenes closely matched stills in the programme booklet. The small roll of negative was (and is) one of the most precious physical icons of Australian cinema – and just a few years short of its century, it is still in good shape! It was a profound comment on Mr Robb's public-spirited support for the Archive that he simply, and unconditionally, donated something for which he could have easily demanded a very high price.

Two years later, there was more! Some children brought into the office of the journal *Cinema Papers* a can of film which they had found on a Melbourne rubbish tip. It turned out to be about 500 feet of release print from the film – probably from its 1910 reissue version. Some of it was decomposed beyond recovery, but most could be saved. Finally we had a substantial sequence from the film, edited and with inter titles, just as the original audiences would have seen it. Altogether, there was now about 5 minutes of footage – not a lot, but enough to convey the flavour and style of the film and to substantiate its historical importance.

No more has yet come to light. The chances of it doing so are slim, but not impossible – and one never gives up hope. It was appropriate that, to mark the Centenary of Cinema in 1995, we finally got Ned Kelly onto an Australian postage stamp. Legally, executed criminals can't be depicted on stamps: but a still from the 1906 film of an actor wearing Ned's actual armour – well, that's different!

(4) The Sentimental Blonde ... er, Bloke

Raymond Longford's 1919 production of *The Sentimental Bloke* is generally regarded as the jewel of Australia's silent era. It is a simple love story set among the working class of suburbia, based on C J Dennis's classic narrative poem of the same name. Starring Arthur Tauchert as Bill, the "bloke", and Lottie Lyell as his girl, Doreen, the film was noted for its naturalistic performances and perceptive casting.

Dennis wrote in broad Australian slang, and the narrative titles of the film directly quote his verse. When Bill is first "intrajuiced" (introduced) to Doreen, he "dips his lid" (raises his hat), and when dressed up to meet his prospective mother-in-law, he remarks of his unaccustomed elegance:

"Me patent leathers nearly brought the tears,
Me stand-up collar sorin' orf me ears"

This device, of course, exploited the imaginative capacity of silent films: everyone in the audience responded to the written word by creating the characters' voices in their heads. Outside Australia, though, the device created its own language barrier. So when the film was

prepared for American release, the titles were re-written in American slang! The main title became *The Sentimental Bloke: The story of a tough guy* and Dennis's verse was recast somewhat. His description of the wedding breakfast:

“An’ then we ‘as a beano up at Mar’s
A slap-up feed, wiv wine an’ two big geese”

becomes

“Then comes the feast at Mar’s: Aunt, uncle, niece,
Done wonders with the wine an’ two big geese”

With the passing of the silent era, Longford's career rapidly declined (he finished his days as a tally clerk on the Sydney waterfront) and his films slipped from sight. Most were lost: a handful have surfaced in incomplete or fragmentary form. The *Bloke* is the only one to survive more or less intact.

In 1952 a nitrate fire atop a building in downtown Melbourne saw the destruction of the film library of the former Government film production unit, the Cinema Branch of the Department of Commerce. A maker of promotional shorts and documentaries, it had effectively closed in the late 1930s. Its head, Lyn T. Maplestone, was one of the earliest advocates of film preservation, and it appears the Unit took some steps to salt away significant films, though which ones is unlikely now ever to be known. Miraculously, two boxes of film survived the fire: they were sent to the Film Division of the Commonwealth National Library in Canberra, and an examination of their contents yielded a complete nitrate release print of *The Sentimental Bloke*.

The head of the Division, Larry Lake, was quick to recognise the film's quality, and in 1954 it was sent to a Sydney laboratory for duplication. A junior technician at the lab named Anthony Buckley was given the task of remaking all the splices in the tinted print. Intrigued, he kept all of the two-frame trims: in later years, he would play a large role in re-awakening interest in Australia's film history, in the development of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) and – eventually – become a major producer in his own right. (He would eventually donate the trims to the Archive and thus provide a record of the original tints and tones.)

16mm prints derived from the Library's acetate negative now began to circulate to film societies and festivals and the *Bloke*, and Longford himself, were re-discovered. Longford has left a poignant record of his feelings in viewing the film again after so many years: by then, everyone else involved in its production was dead and the experience was bittersweet.

Fast forward to 1973. As a young film archivist, I undertook a study tour of overseas archives which eventually led me to George Eastman House, Rochester, USA, and its legendary film curator, James Card. I had heard rumours that George Eastman House had a nitrate copy of *The Sentimental Bloke* and I wanted to check this out, so I asked Card if the title rang a bell. He replied that he thought they had something. We trudged out through the snow to the nitrate vaults. Jim opened one of the vaults and we went inside and rummaged for a while. Eventually I came across six cans labelled *The Sentimental Blonde*. This sounded too much of a coincidence, so I opened the first can, unreeled it down to the main title, and saw the credit for Raymond Longford. It was the original negative of *The Sentimental Bloke*. I can't describe how I felt in actually holding those six cans. Every archivist treasures the moments of great finds.

How did the negative get to Eastman House? No one knew, but it is likely to have landed there with a job-lot of silent films, perhaps the stock of a defunct distributor. As noted before, when Australian producers secured an overseas release they had no choice but to send over

their original negative for release printing, and often for re-editing as well: there were no satisfactory dupe negative stocks available and even if there had been, Australian producers could not have afforded to make them. The negative was seldom returned: there were no further printing demands in the home country and the freight cost could not be justified.

Finding the negative was one thing: getting access to it quite another. Overloaded and underfunded, film archives can be notoriously slow to deal with loans or duping requests when there may be other priorities. Eventually, when Paolo Cherchi Usai took over as Senior Curator of Film at Eastman House, an exchange was arranged under which Eastman's preservation copy – a superb fine grain positive taken off the original negative – was loaned to the NFSA. Visually, it was far superior to the existing version derived from the "Cinema Branch" release print. But there were differences: it was shorter (many scenes had been trimmed and tightened), it contained a few additional shots, and all the narrative titles were in American slang!

A major reconstruction – based mainly on the Eastman visuals and utilising the original C J Dennis titles – was embarked on with a projected release date of September 2001 – a story in its own right. The tints and tones will be reinstated, utilising Anthony Buckley's "trims" as colour reference. And we can thank a chain of players – and Providence – for the survival of one of Australia's cinematic treasures.