

Greater Union Organisation/Ken G. Hall Award

AN OUTLAW INDUSTRY

Bushrangers on the big screen: 1906-1993

A paper

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Bushranger films have dominated the history of Australian cinema. From *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906) to *Reckless Kelly* (1993), the ghosts of Australia's outlaw period have been revived, on flickering screens, in more than thirty films, as well as several television productions. In this paper I intend to examine the reasons for this ongoing fascination with the bushranger legend, with particular reference to concurrent events in Australian society.

Despite the endurance of the genre, it has rarely been easy going for the producers of bushranger films (or their audiences for that matter!) Always subject to the whims of fashion, the bushranger film has also been buffeted by American imports, criticism about historical accuracy, and, in some states, outright banning by conservative forces. Before all that though, were the glory years.

IN THE BEGINNING

The movie business has long been characterised by a close relationship between art and commerce, so it is probably not surprising that our first bushranger film, and probably the world's longest narrative film at the time, was created for economic reasons. In 1906 a play called *The Kelly Gang* began drawing crowds away from *Living London*, an actuality film which was being distributed by Millard Johnson and his brother-in-law William A. Gibson.¹ Having obtained the rights, Johnson & Gibson made the leap from film distribution to production, and *The Story of the Kelly Gang* was born.

It was hyped as 'the greatest, most thrilling, and sensational moving picture ever taken'.² With a team of backstage sound effects operators, actors performing the voices, and an orchestra providing live music, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* was a major hit, running for weeks in full houses across the country, and returning a handsome profit to the film's backers, J. & N. Tait. However not everyone was impressed. From the *Bulletin*: 'These splendid bushrangers never come within a hundred yards of a woman without taking off their hats... this is held to be a glorious characteristic, and justifies all Ned Kelly's viciousness and villainies'.³ Another reviewer thought the show was too noisy, but conceded 'it is the sort of bellowdrama that the lower orders crave for... two thirds of Australia will want to see it'.⁴

It is interesting to consider that *The Great American Train Robbery*, produced three years earlier, was less than half the length of Johnson & Gibson's Kelly film, but is still widely considered to be the world's first feature film.

In Australia, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* was released into an environment of bland, prosperous conservatism. It was a year of record wool and wheat exports; the right-wing Deakin Government was returned in the national election, and wowsers in Victoria attempted to abolish the Melbourne Cup holiday. In retrospect, the success of *The Story of the Kelly Gang* seems inevitable.

At the Sydney premiere of Charles McMahon's *Robbery Under Arms*, in 1907, 'the ticket office was almost wrecked by a remarkable crush'.⁵ Clearly the public's enthusiasm for bushranger films had not yet been whetted. Unfortunately, like most of Australia's silent films, only still photographs from this production remain.

CHARLES COZENS SPENCER

In September 1930 news filtered back to Australia that an Australian expatriate in Canada had gone crazy and murdered a number of people before shooting himself. The gunman's name was Charles Cozens Spencer. Spencer has been described as 'one of the boldest and most visionary showmen'⁶ of the early years of the Australian film industry. Together with his wife, who 'performed' as Senora Spencer, Australia's only woman projectionist, Spencer travelled around Australia as an exhibitor before establishing a production unit in 1908.

Spencer's first contribution to the flourishing bushranger genre was *The Life and Adventures of John Vane, the Notorious Australian Bushranger* in 1910. Directed by Stephen Fitzgerald, the film follows Vane's career as a bushranger with Ben Hall, until he reforms and becomes a model citizen following a stint in prison. The *Bulletin* described the film as 'a rare hash of saintliness and sensation'.⁷

In 1911 Spencer made no less than three bushranger films. First up was *Captain Midnight - the Bush King*. Once again the critics were divided. Some argued that the scenery (which was filmed at Manly and in the Blue Mountains) gave 'realism and distinction to the film',⁸ while the *Sydney Morning Herald* thought it was unfortunate that bushranger films like *Midnight* 'frequently identified with the murderous doings of ruffians carefully whitewashed, and presented as heroes'.⁹

Captain Starlight, or *Gentleman of the Road*, was the second attempt to transfer Rolf Boldrewood's novel *Robbery Under Arms* to the big screen. Spencer met accusations of immorality by running large newspaper advertisements in which he claimed to be throwing 'no halo of romance over crime'.¹⁰ Whether the guardians of public morality were convinced is unclear, but the film ran for a profitable extended period.

Nothing remains of Spencer's final bushranger epic for the year, *Dan Morgan, the Terror of the Australian Bush*, but reviews suggest the film-makers took full advantage of the bloodthirsty aspects of the tale as Morgan 'robs, burns and outrages indiscriminately throughout his brief career'.¹¹

Today Spencer is mainly remembered not for his own work, but for the fact that he introduced Australia's greatest director of silent films, Raymond Longford, to the screen.

'BIG JACK' GAVIN & CO.

In 1910/11 bushranger films were rapidly metamorphosing from a genre into an industry of their own. Another prolific actor, director and producer was John F. 'Big Jack' Gavin.

Eclipsing even Spencer in his prodigious output, Gavin's bushranging movies included *Thunderbolt* (of which a large segment was recently recovered), *Ben Hall and His Gang*, *Frank Gardiner*, and *Moonlite - King of the Road*. His enthusiastic but artless production-line method was summed up years later by Raymond Longford (who appeared in many bushranger films as an actor), in a description of the typical independent producer of the time:

All he needed was to get a coach and half a dozen revolvers, and a lot of fellows with whiskers playing bushrangers, and go along and shoot in the air - shoot anywhere, in fact - and shoot everybody stone dead. That's all they did. And that was the start of it.¹²

John Gavin was a master at cutting production costs: where possible he would use locations close to Sydney. In *Thunderbolt*, striking coal miners were used as extras, and Gavin's own wife, Agnes, played a supporting role in blackface for *Moonlite*.¹³ Despite Gavin's rough and ready approach, most of these films appear to have made money for their backers. But the honeymoon was coming to an end. In a few years Gavin would be working as an extra in Hollywood Westerns, with the occasional job as a straight man for comedians such as Harold Lloyd.

One of the last bushranger films to be made before the censors banned them completely was *A Tale of the Australian Bush*, aka *Ben Hall, the Notorious Bushranger* (1911). This version, produced by Gaston Mervale, 'recorded a triumph of law over lawlessness'.¹⁴ Another Ben Hall story, *A Bushranger's Ransom*, was produced by the French firm Pathe Freres (then the largest production company in the world)¹⁵ in the same year.

OUTLAWS OUTLAWED

It was obvious that the bushranger boom was over when the following advertisement appeared in an Adelaide newspaper in 1911:

The Management of West's [an exhibitor] offer a prize of 25 gns. for the best Kinematograph Drama. Subject must deal with Australian life. (Bushranging Incidents Barred)¹⁶

Soon after, two major exhibitors publicly announced they would no longer be showing bushranger films, 'for the country's good'.¹⁷ The Home Secretary, Mr Appel, commented on the demoralising influence of bushranging picture shows, suggesting that censorship might be the best solution. In 1912, Victorian police acted to include Melbourne in a ban on the showing of Ned Kelly films. Soon after, the New South Wales Police Department banned the production of all bushranging films.¹⁸ These events, together with the rise of the 'combine' (an alignment of exhibitors and distributors which had no interest in local feature production),¹⁹ and the outbreak of war in Europe, dealt the bushranger film a body blow from which it would not begin to recover until 1920. Throughout this period only one film with a connection to the genre was produced, *Moondyne*, in 1913.

BETWEEN WARS

Unlike the period of complacency at the beginning of the century, World War I was a time of pulling together in the face of the threat to Empire. Certainly there was no room for stories about outlaws making the authorities look foolish. In 1920 however, with the danger past, Welsh-born actor/writer Harry Southwell decided it was time for *The Kelly Gang* to be inflicted on the cinema-going public once more. Calling himself the 'Welsh Wizard', Southwell slipped past the

cancel by having Kelly played by a middle-aged overweight actor wearing linoleum armour, and interspersing the film with 'laborious' warnings against the temptations of outlawry.²⁰ Three years later, Southwell re-made this film even less successfully as *When the Kellys Were Out*, releasing it to scathing reviews overseas and a complete ban on exhibition in New South Wales.

1920 also saw the production of a new *Robbery Under Arms*, this time directed by Kenneth Brampton. The censor was not amused: 'I fail to see that any good or useful object will be served by re-producing on a moving picture film the bad old days; they are gone, let us hope forever'.²¹

Cultural imperialism was now a greater threat than censorship. With the near-destruction of European film culture during World War I, Hollywood was stronger than ever before, flooding Australia with high quality westerns and comedy material. Snowy Baker, the star of another bushranging film of this era, *The Shadow of Lightning Ridge* (1920) emigrated to Hollywood in 1923, disgusted at the lack of opportunities in the dwindling Australian industry.²² (Considering Paul Hogan and *Lightning Jack* (1994), things don't seem to have changed too much).

In March 1922 *The Gentleman Bushranger* (incidentally director Beaumont Smith's first and last attempt at the genre), was the only Australian film showing at Union Theatres eight Sydney cinemas.²³ John Gavin's return to Australia to make the 'sadly lacking'²⁴ *Trooper O'Brien* (1928) did little to help the situation, and in the 1930s only two bushranger films were made, both by Harry Southwell, and both about the Kellys. When these films flopped, Southwell finally realised that the Kelly goldmine had become a curse.

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

After seventeen years out in the cold, Ned Kelly returned to the screen in *The Glenrowan Affair*, directed by Rupert Kathner, in 1951. Starring footballer Bob Chitty, a typical review of this film said: 'The script is dreary, the photography more often out-of-focus than in, the editing is unimaginative and the acting petrified'.²⁵

With Robert Menzies firmly installed as Prime Minister once more and fears of communism dominating the headlines, Cecil Holmes' leftist production of *Captain Thunderbolt* in 1953 was entirely out of step with the times. When the film failed to find the television audience it was seeking, the director went on to become a distributor specialising in Soviet cinema.²⁶

The 1957 incarnation of *Robbery Under Arms*, starring Peter Finch, was directed by an Englishman, Jack Lee, and released during one of the most severe rural droughts ever seen in Australia. Although the film did reasonable business against competition from overseas like *The Searchers* and *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, the film was criticised in some quarters for being 'most uneven'.²⁷

The closest thing to a bushranging film to be produced in Australia for the next eleven years would be the Japanese Western production *Koya No Toseinin (The Drifting Avenger)*, directed by Junya Sato.²⁸

RE-MAKING THE MYTH

The 1970s, a period of renewed interest in the bushranger genre, saw more film-makers from overseas showing an interest in the Australian outlaw legend. First up was English director Tony Richardson, whose controversial casting of Mick Jagger as *Ned Kelly* (1970), tended to overshadow some of the more serious weaknesses of the film.

Although freed from the censorship restrictions of earlier bushranger films, *Ned Kelly* has a distant, uninvolved quality, with neither the strong foundation of a legendary/heroic treatment or the realism that recent historical research might have brought to the story. The film was further weakened by over-compression of characters and events, the use of non-Victorian locations, and an American, Waylon Jennings, singing the Australian folk songs which linked the narrative.

Richardson's film was made in a difficult creative climate, with at least three rival Kelly projects being floated at the time of production.²⁹ This may explain, if not excuse, some of the problems with the film.

A less controversial, though equally imported release, was *Adam's Woman*. Directed by Philip Leacock in 1970 for Warner Brothers, *Adam's Woman* starred Beau Bridges (whose only concession to the period setting was a drooping mous-tache), and has been described as a 'rambling convict Western'.³⁰

Perhaps the most Australian of the 1970s bushranger films - despite its American star Dennis Hopper and French-born director Philippe Mora - was *Mad Dog Morgan*. Based on twelve years of research, and shot in actual Morgan locations, the film was well-supported by critics. Bill Collins, with typical understatement, said *Mad Dog Morgan* was 'sensationally good'.³¹ In 1976 it won an award for best Western at Cannes, perhaps reflecting Mora's use of Western-style violence. Unfortunately it was all to no avail: audiences so soon after the Vietnam War were in no mood for stories about violent anti-heroes, and the film was a commercial flop.

As if to make up for the number of recent international films dealing with the theme, Australian television produced three dramatic treatments of bushranging stories near the end of the '70s; *Ben Hall*, *The Trial of Ned Kelly* and *The Last Outlaw*.

And so we come to the two most recent bushranger films. First there was another version of *Robbery Under Arms* (1985), made at the height of Australia's decade of optimism, during the 10BA era. Then, in 1993, while the country was still in the midst of recession, Yahoo Serious attempted to do with the Kelly legend what he had done with the history of science in *Young Einstein*. The result was called *Reckless Kelly*.

Robbery Under Arms (\$7m) and *Reckless Kelly* (\$20m) both broke budgetary records for films made in Australia.³² Beyond that, the two movies have little in common, another than a fairly lukewarm reception from their respective audiences. The central criticism of *Robbery Under Arms* was that, despite the fine central performance of Sam Neill, 'there was no new insight into the bushranging hero stereotype'.³³ In other words the story did not justify its re-telling. With *Reckless Kelly*, the problem lay with too much baggage being crammed aboard the central

character. Instead of reflecting ‘something of the Australian psyche’ via a Ned Kelly who ‘represents many things’,³⁴ as was intended, the film simply collapsed under its own weight. It is yet to be seen whether Yahoo Serious will survive the film as a creative force, or go the way of Harry Southwell and all the other (20th century) victims of Ned Kelly.

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Like much Australian history, the story of bushranging film production in this country is one of lost chances. In 1912, when the American Western was being used as an experimental training ground for such future cinematic giants as D.W. Griffith,³⁵ the Australian bushranger film already seemed stuck with a small number of stock situations and characters, with well-meaning plodders like John Gavin dominating proceedings. In 1993, when Clint Eastwood was pushing the barriers of the Western genre with *Unforgiven*, Yahoo Serious embarrassed audiences by imposing tired stereotypes and trendy jokes on the Kelly myth.

While the cynical might argue that thirty-five bushranger films in less than a century simply suggests a lack of imagination on the part of Australian writers and producers, I believe these stories have an inherent and enduring fascination for audiences. In an era of international co-production and world mono-culture we must hold on to the things that make Australia unique. Our bushranging heritage is one of those things, and in my opinion, despite the number of films produced so far, the definitive bushranger film is yet to be made.

NOTES

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