The University of Newcastle
History Club
Department of History

STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

No. 5

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PREFACE

In the Australian History course offered in Second Year at the University of Newcastle, as part of their progressive assessment, students have the opportunity of either presenting a conventional essay or of researching a topic of their own choice from primary sources. Many students choose the second alternative, and since this programme began in 1976 a considerable corpus of material on the local history of this area has been built up. The papers are all available for public use in the local history collection of the Newcastle Public Library. The best of the papers, however, are made available to a wider readership by publishing them each year.

This, unfortunately, may be the last issue of the publication, as a reorganisation of the courses offered in this department has meant that Australian History will be taught in First Year only, where unstructured private research by students would be less appropriate. However, the editors hope you will find the papers in this volume as interesting and useful as we did.

Peter Hempenstall, Margaret Henry, Noel Rutherford.

CONTENTS

SMALL TOWN CINEMA:

AN ENTERTAINMENT MONOPOLY

BY

CATHY GRAHAM

SYNOPSIS:

The popularity of the motion picture was at its height in Australia in the interwar years. As a result, the cinema occupied an influential position in the community, especially in small towns such as Swansea where it maintained a virtual monopoly on organized social entertainment. The nature of the monopoly exercised by the Graceson Theatre in Swansea is examined for the period 1920-1940 against the larger background of developments in the national film industry and social attitudes of the time.

Popular culture in Australia has been dominated for the greater part of the twentieth century by the power of the motion pictures. Although such popularity is by no means as apparent today, the cinema, especially between the two world wars, "was the best attended, most criticised, liveliest and most influential component of our popular culture".[1] Probably the greatest attraction of the cinema was its easy accessibility. Almost every small town and suburb boasted, if not a "picture palace", then at least a venue where films were screened regularly.[2] As the local cinema afforded not only cheap entertainment but also, quite often, the only form of entertainment, attendance was well-nigh mandatory. The small coastal town of Swansea was no exception and the fortunes of the Graceson Theatre demonstrate the influence exerted by the cinema in its interwar heyday.

By 1920 cinema had firmly established itself as a feature of Australian society. The average weekly cinema attendance was estimated at slightly over one million (out of a population of ca. five and a quarter million) and the number of cinemas in Australia at eight hundred and eight.[3] One of these eight hundred and eight cinemas was a small, wooden hall in Swansea, bought in 1920 by T.J. Dobinson, a newcomer to the town.[4] A builder by trade, Dobinson visualized a great future for the small, coastal village whose two hundred inhabitants relied mainly on the mining and fishing industries for their livelihood.[5] Whilst still maintaining his building firm, Dobinson established the first permanent cinema in Swansea, naming it the Graceson Theatre in honour of his daughter, Grace.

The cinema was very much a family concern. The roles of projectionist, ticket-seller, usherettes, "bouncers" and cleaners were all filled by members of Dobinson's family as the turnover was not sufficient to warrant employing paid help.[6] Nevertheless, the cinema thrived. The twenties was the era of the silent movies and the townspeople queued at the door of the tiny, tin-roofed building each Saturday night to witness the wonders of the moving pictures. Films featuring well-known actors were certain of attracting large audiences.[7] The antics of such stars as Charlie Chaplin could be viewed from the comfort of hard, wooden benches and were accompanied by the melodramatic strains of the pianola, interspersed with the wrangling of irate adults and excited children.[8] It was a far cry from the luxury of the newly-appearing city picture palaces which boasted Wurlitzer organs and orchestras and often featured theatrical acts such as singers, jugglers, magicians and tank divers.[9]

The obvious crudity of the Graceson Theatre, however, was unlikely to deter its patrons once the novelty of film-going wore off, for the simple reason that there was very little else in the town in the way of organized social entertainment. For several years the hotel was the only other building of any size so that most social functions had to be held in the cinema building. "Travelling shows, magicians, concerts, boxing matches, bazaar shows and even a lion act" were among the features staged in the Graceson Theatre.[10] It even doubled as a roller-skating rink until a special building was constructed in later years.[11] Dances were a common event and often followed the Saturday night screening, although on numerous occasions the only musical accompaniment would be a single accordion.[12]

Dobinson was thus enjoying sufficient success in 1923 to confide to the film trade journal Everyones that he was "having plans prepared for the erection of a new theatre to take the place of the present building". According to the journal, Dobinson anticipated that "with the big additions in Newcastle at the ironworks...quite a number of workers" would move to the town.[13] The population boom did not occur but Dobinson continued to extend and renovate the building until 1928 when he began the construction of a new concrete cinema over the existing structure.[14]

By this time, the Graceson Theatre had established itself as the social hub of the town. Film screenings were advertised in the Newcastle Morning Herald, especially during the summer months when the population was swelled by holidaymakers - most of them miners. The influence of the mining community was apparent at the time of the 1923 Bellbird Colliery disaster when several benefit nights were organized in the theatre to raise funds for the victims' families.[15]

Other charity performances and concerts were also held in the Graceson, particularly in aid of the Red Cross and the Ambulance Fund.[16] The flavour of this small town venture was apparent in other ways. The residing policeman sat free-of-charge in the back row on cinema nights, not only as a mark of deference to him but also as a precautionary measure in the event of trouble arising.[17] The town's postmistress and newsagent, Mrs. Boon, spent Saturday afternoons in winter baking meat pies to sell to the cinema patrons who would flock to her shop during intermission on cold Saturday nights.[18] A bus was often chartered to convey the residents of ten kilometre distant Catherine Hill Bay to the Saturday night screenings.[19]

The physical isolation of small communities such as Swansea and Catherine Hill Bay was one of the main factors in ensuring the success of the local cinema. Few people owned cars and a private bus company constituted Swansea's only public transport system. The closest township of any size was eight kilometre distant Belmont and it offered little more than did Swansea in the way of entertainment. As a result, self-sufficiency was the key-note of organized entertainment. The Graceson Theatre both catered for this need and operated according to the principle. T.J. Dobinson was owner, manager and even builder of his theatre, and, in the later days of the "talking pictures" he became chief technician when he designed his own equipment to cope with the added dimension of sound.[20]

While film trade journals "buzzed with pep talks from American producers and distributors, innumerable advertising hints" and stories of "street stunts and ballyhoo",[21] T.J. Dobinson employed less subtle means of attracting patrons. One typical advertisement in the Newcastle Morning Herald ran as follows:-[22]

SWANSEA PICTURES

Hoot Gibson in Chips of the Flying U
Madge Bellamy in The Shamrock Handicap
Also, The Charleston

Every person paying admission To-night will be presented with an Envelope, and the lucky person will receive 10s.

DANCE AFTER THE PICTURES

Dobinson was equally as blunt in discouraging unruly patrons. A poster in the theatre advised them as to the propriety of cinema etiquette with such maxims as:-

> "If you have seen a picture before, don't make a nuisance of yourself by telling in a loud voice what is coming on the screen," and;
> "If you must kiss your girl in the dark, for heaven's sake do it quietly, not like a horse pulling his foot out of a mud hole".[23]

The confident mood of these times ended abruptly with the coincidence, at the turn of the decade, of the "talking pictures" and a nation-wide depression, both of which had repercussions on the small cinema in Swansea. While the advent of the "talkies" provided a much-needed boost for the film industry as a whole, the technical innovations involved in screening them proved too costly and complex for many small shows which, consequently, were forced to close down.[24] Dobinson seemed likely to share their fate as early problems with sound equipment, particularly in synchronizing the sound with the picture, exasperated many patrons.[25] A decline in patronage due to the economic recession of the times eventually forced him to close the cinema for six months at the height of the depression.[26]

However, Dobinson recovered from these setbacks to improve his sound equipment and complete the building of the new, much larger theatre which had a seating capacity of nine hundred and eighty.[27] By the end of the thirties the cinema boasted six sessions a week and was screening virtually all the films entering the country.[28] The advent of the "talkies" had also marked the introduction of the standard cinema programme of that decade. It consisted of two newsreels, a support film followed by an interval, the feature film and then a concluding two reel cartoon.[29] All this was offered at a charge of one shilling for adults and sixpence for children.[30]

Dobinson weathered these bad times with seemingly better success than Australian film makers whose complaints gained a hearing when a Royal Commission was set up in 1927 to investigate the motion picture industry.[31] Their main targets were the American film distributing companies whom they accused of maintaining a monopoly on the industry through the systems of "blind" and "book" bookings. Exhibitors hired films through these agencies either without having seen the films or by booking large blocks of American films, making it "almost impossible for Australian films made by independent producers to get release on reasonable terms".[32] By this stage, more than ninety per cent of the films shown in Australia were American.[33] In order to protect the Australian film industry, the Australian Motion Picture Producing Association recommended to the government that New South Wales exhibitors should be compelled to exhibit "a percentage of up to 25% of British films, of which at least 15% are to be Australian-made Moving Picture productions".[34]

The issue of protection of the Australian and Empire film industry was re-examined in another Royal Commission investigation in 1933-34, but this time the quota recommendations were enforced. The Film Quota Bill was passed by the New South Wales Parliament on April 13, 1935 and required exhibitors to screen not less thantwo and a half percent of Australian feature films in their programmes, with provision for an

annually increasing percentage.[36] The import tax on foreign films was also retained while British films remained duty free.[37] While empire loyalists, women's groups, clerics and Australian film makers applauded this opposition to "American economic and cultural imperialism", film exhibitors were far less enthusiastic.[38] As the protests of the President of the Federated Picture Showmen's Association of Australia, Mr. W. Howe, had been explained in 1927:-

> ...the pictures are the cheapest form of amusement, and his [Howe's] Association rely [sic] mostly on the working class for support. The Association supplies what the public require, and to be a successful exhibitor you must give what they demand".[39]

"What the public required" seemed not to accord with what the government required, if T.J. Dobinson's experiences provide any indication. Dobinson hired the specified percentage of quota films but rarely screened them because they usually attracted only sparse audiences. He found it more profitable to hire, in addition, a more popular American film and screen it in place of the quota film.[40] This prejudice was also apparent towards British films and seems not to have been peculiar to Swansea audiences if the report of the British magazine, Bioscope, is accurate:-

> In Australia, the exhibition of British films is said not be [sic] have met with universal success in recent years. Exhibitors have stated that there is a distinct apathy towards them on the part of the audiences, owing to lack of merit, which, in turn, has meant diminished box-office returns.[41]

Yet, in the same issue, the magazine expressed its opinion that:-

> Despite the fact that it has been nourished chiefly on American films, Australian taste has not really been Americanised, but remains British in fundamentals.[42]

Such discussions of the influence of the films on the public character were common throughout the interwar period and reflect the degree of power attributed to the cinema in society.[43] Indeed, as late as 1943, the influence of the cinema was deemed so great by one writer that he could commend the cinema:-

> ...not only as a place of wholesome entertainment, but also as a place to go for inspiration, guidance and assistance in all things pertaining to civic administration and the causes of charity and patriotism.[44]

Patriotic zeal may well account for this extravagant estimation of the role of the cinema but, after twenty years of cinema management, T.J. Dobinson's milder opinion is essentially the same:-

> To my mind a picture theatre proprietor carries a tremendous responsibility to the public, who quite rightly regard their theatres as not only places of entertainment, but also as centres of social intercourse.[45]

Dobinson's statement provides an accurate representation of the role of the Graceson Theatre in the small town of Swansea in the two decades between 1920 and 1940. The cinema was the "centre of social intercourse" and herein lies the answer to its universal appeal. In a small and relatively isolated community with minimal facilities for social functions, the cinema offered an inexpensive and easily accessible opportunity for social intercourse. The age of television, drive-in theatres, clubs and improved transportation had not yet arrived, so the cinema had little competition with which to contend. The attraction of the films themselves is undeniable but it is doubtful that aesthetic considerations were uppermost in the minds of Swansea citizens, particularly in view of the habits of one regular patron who invariably slept through the main section of the programme but asked fellow patrons to "wake me up when the comics come"![46] Paradoxically, the extent to which the Graceson Theatre became an integral and commonplace feature of the community is illustrated by the difficulty experienced by long-term residents of Swansea in remembering details associated with it. Very few can recall specifics yet they invariably comment:-

> You just went; everybody went because there was nowhere else to go.[47]

FOOTNOTES

1. Collins, Diane, "The Movie Octopus" in Spearritt, P. & Walker, D., ed., Australian Popular Culture, Sydney, 1979, p.102.
2. Murray, Robert, The Confident Years: Australia in the Twenties, Victoria, 1978, pp.184-5.
3. Megaw, Ruth, "The American Image: Influence on Australian Theatre Management, 1896-1923", J.R.A.H.S., Vol.54, Pt.2, June, 1968, p.200.
4. Interview with Ken Dobinson, 12 May, 1980.
5. Dobinson, Brian, "Thomas J. Dobinson - Public Servant", May, 1978, p.2.
6. Ibid.
7. Interview with Ken Dobinson, 12 May, 1980.
8. Interviews with Miss L. Boon, 30 May, 1980 and Mrs C. Cowmeadow, 17 May, 1980.
9. Murray, op.cit., p.185.
10. Dobinson, Brian, op.cit., p.3.
11. Ken Dobinson interview.
12. Interview with Mrs Ham, 17 May, 1980.
13. Everyones, 9 May, 1923, p.144.
14. Dobinson, Brian, op.cit., p.2.
15. Ken Dobinson interview.
16. Ibid.
17. Dobinson, Brian, op.cit.
18. Miss Boon interview.
19. Ken Dobinson interview.
20. Dobinson, Brian, op.cit., p.3.
21. Collins, op.cit., p.104.
22. Newcastle Morning Herald, 4 December, 1926.
23. Newcastle University Archives, A5428.
24. "Silent Pictures Boasted Big Screens Too", Newcastle Morning Herald, 10 January, 1955, p.5.
25. Dobinson, Brian, op.cit., p.3.
26. Ken Dobinson interview.
27. Film Weekly - Motion Picture Directory 1949-50, p.74.
28. Ken Dobinson interview.
29. Interviews with Ken Dobinson and Miss L. Boon.
30. Ken Dobinson interview.
31. Megaw, op.cit., p.199.
32. Reade, Eric, The Australian Screen, Melbourne, 1975, p.139.
33. Murray, op.cit., p.184.
34. "Statement for Cabinet", 31/1/1927, p.1, State Archives, 5412.
35. Murray, op.cit., p.188.
36. Reade, op.cit., p.178; Ina Bertrand, Film Censorship in Australia, Qld., 1978, p.31.
37. Ibid., p.176.
38. Collins, op.cit., p.107.
39. "Statement for Cabinet", op.cit.
40. Ken Dobinson interview.
41. The British Bioscope Film Number, 1929, p.63.
42. Ibid., p.67.
43. Diane Collins' article in Popular Culture provides many examples of the attitudes of various social groups, particularly women's groups, to the influence of the movies in this period.

44. Ernest Turnbull, "Too Much Done By Too Few" in Film Weekly, 16 December, 1943, p.19.
45. Extract from a policy letter written by Dobinson on 24 April, 1940, notifying Merriwa residents of his purchase of the Astros Theatre, Merriwa. Newcastle University Archives, "Graceson Theatre Collection", A5355.
46. Interview with Miss L. Boon.
47. Interviews with such residents as Mesdames Cowmeadow, Boland, Ham, and Chalmers, Miss Boon and Mr. Dobinson, all yielded this typical statement.

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