

TONY MOORE

Tony Moore is a cultural historian, commentator and documentary film-maker with a special interest in Australian pop culture, artistic bohemia and Labor politics. He is Commissioning Editor of Pluto Press Australia, prior to which he was a program maker at ABC TV where his last documentary was *Bohemian Rhapsody: Rebels of Australian Culture*, now the subject of a PhD he is completing at the University of Sydney. Tony's recent essay on Marcus Clarke, 'Urban Iconoclast', was selected for *Best Essays 2005*, edited by Robert Dessaix and published by Black Inc.

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

the
barry mckenzie
movies

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AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

JANE MILLS
Series Editor

Our national cinema plays a vital role in our cultural heritage and in showing us what it is to be Australian. But the picture can be blurred by unruly forces including competing artistic aims, inconstant personal tastes, political vagaries, constantly changing priorities in screen education and training, and technological innovations and market forces.

When these forces remain unconnected, the result can be an artistically impoverished cinema and audiences who are disinclined to seek out and derive pleasure from a diverse range of films.

Screen culture, of which this series is a part, is the glue needed to stick these forces together. It's the plankton in the food chain that feeds the imagination of our filmmakers and their audiences. It's what makes sense of the opinions, memories, responses, knowledge and exchange of ideas about film.

Above all, screen culture is informed by a *love* of cinema. And it has to be carefully nurtured if we are to understand

A U S T R A L I A N S C R E E N C L A S S I C S

and appreciate the aesthetic, moral, intellectual and sentient value of our national cinema.

Australian Screen Classics will match some of our best-loved films with some of our most distinguished writers and thinkers, drawn from the worlds of culture, criticism and politics. All we ask of our writers is that they feel passionate about the films they choose. Through these thoughtful, elegantly-written books, we hope that screen culture will work its sticky magic.

Jane Mills is a Senior Research Associate at the Australian Film, Television & Radio School, a Board Member of the Sydney Film Festival and is the recipient of a scholarship at the Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Australia.

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Introduction

Dinki-di Tales of a True Blue Boy

Struggling to make a living as an actor in pre-swinging 1960s London, a young Australian of bohemian habits accepted a commission to write a comic strip that was to change his life. His name was Barry Humphries, and he had a gift for using humour to skewer his countrymen's foibles. Peter Cook, editor of the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, asked the young expat to aim his barbed wit at the hordes of other young Australians then crowding into the west London neighbourhoods of Earls Court and Notting Hill, and Barry McKenzie, a young, uncouth innocent abroad, was born.

Drawn by New Zealander Nicholas Garland, the cartoon Barry McKenzie looked like a cross between Chesty Bond and the Jolly Swagman, dressed in a 1950s double-breasted suit screwed down with a wide-brimmed Akubra hat that never left his head. 'Bazza', as he was known, was vulgar and irrepressible, perpetually sucking on 'ice cold tubes of Fosters', trying unsuccessfully to get 'a sheila into a game of sink the sausage', and 'chundering' at will on unfortunate 'poms' who crossed his inebriated path. He allowed Humphries to have a spray at

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The comic strip *Barry McKenzie* written by Barry Humphries and drawn by Nicholas Garland for *Private Eye*.

everything he disliked about Australia and England. The strip became a cult hit in Britain. In Australia it was banned. Against the odds it was made into two early films of the 1970s Australian cinema revival, both directed by Bruce Beresford in close collaboration with Humphries.

It's difficult to believe that as a teenager I was allowed to show *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*, the 1974 sequel to *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), at my high school in 1976. Today, with lines like 'our dear little stunted, slant-eyed yellow friends' and 'have a crack at putting the ferret through the furry hoop', it would ring alarm bells. But in the libertarian '70s our teachers knew nothing about political correctness. What we schoolboys knew was that this film, with its ribald humour, inventive Aussie slang, great songs, slapstick, beer, violence, vomiting, vampires, prostitutes and kung-fu fights was a riot. And who could doubt that *Holds His Own* was 'a bloody good cultural show', to quote one of its characters,

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when the Prime Minister himself, Gough Whitlam, made an appearance? As the years have passed both Barry McKenzie movies have, like a fine brew, only got better.

I first encountered Barry McKenzie as an icon of a cocky, cheeky Aussie pop culture that was flowing through the suburbs in the '70s. If the films allowed Humphries and Beresford to play with memories of a disappearing Australia of their youth and to pit the certainties of the old Australia against the pretensions of the new, they provided my generation with a way of making sense of social changes we were living through—and rather liked. By the early '70s the transgressive values of the late 1960s cultural revolution were going feral in the back blocks of Australia. The permissive society may have been hatched in the kaftans of the counter-culture but its ground zero was in the suburbs.

For teenagers in the '70s, pop culture was a smorgasbord of 'tubes, boobs and pubes'—thanks in no small part to the cultural iconoclasts of the '60s getting their hands on the mainstream media. From the cartoon surfy pig *Captain Goodvibes* to the surreal comedy *Aunty Jack*, to glam pop band Skyhooks, and to sex symbol Abigail, the Australian airwaves were full of people behaving badly. From the time I was 10, sizzling soapie *Number 96* was the hearth around which our family gathered nightly. If adults ceased to be shocked, a generation of children really didn't know what that word meant as they became accustomed to sensation, surprise and difference. What is hard to grasp for older people who struggled against the 1950s cultural cringe, is just how familiarised our generation was to Australian sights and sounds—on the box, at the flicks, over the 'tranny'.

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Barry McKenzie seeped into my schoolboy consciousness thanks to the promotional blitz that accompanied the first film. Its theme song, performed by Smacka Fitzgibbon, a leagues club crooner with the nasal drawl of a race caller, combined a jaunty pub sing-a-long with an operatic serenading of the hero with lines like ‘from the team that gave you Sir Robert Menzies’ and, more amusing for young boys, ‘If you want to get your sister in a frenzy, introduce her to Barry McKenzie’. As far as we were concerned its ‘R’ classification stood for ‘rude’—earned, so the rumours went, for vomiting, urinating and dirty language. This was music to schoolboys’ ears even if for all those under 18, the film would have to remain an alluring yet unattainable mystery, forbidden fruit, like alcohol and sex.

Hot on the heels of the Bazza song came another version, this time about Gough Whitlam. Again crooned by Smacka, it boasted lines like ‘he’s a handsome wild colonial man, but he’ll join the bloody world if he possibly can’. It aired on the iconoclastic current affairs show *This Day Tonight*, and was sung with gusto by me and my mates in the Port Kembla primary playground. From that moment, in my mind, Barry McKenzie and Gough Whitlam were inextricably connected. Whitlam, like Bazza, was a larger than life Aussie original who had arrived with an all-singing celebrity chorus declaring ‘It’s Time’ and could always surprise when he opened his mouth. Some of the old blokes who hung around Whitlam, like our local member, Rex Connor, wore hats and suits like Bazza and sounded very old Australian, like a cement mixer full of gravel. Bazza stuck it up the poms, and for us ‘Aussies’ who had to endure taunts from our ‘wog’ classmates about our second-hand monarch, Bazza and Gough were our home-grown heroes.