

HENRY REYNOLDS

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AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

the chant
of jimmie
blacksmith

HENRY REYNOLDS



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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 at least something of what it is to be Australian. But the picture can get blurred by unruly forces such as 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, including Australian ones.

This series is a part of screen culture which is the glue needed to stick these forces together. It's the plankton in the moving image food chain that feeds the imagination of our film-makers 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 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 and introduce more audiences to Australian cinema.

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A THRICE-TOLD TALE

I was surprised when I was invited to write a short study of an Australian film. Why me, I thought? It was something I had never done before or ever thought about doing. While I was a fairly regular cinema-goer I had missed many Australian films of the past thirty years as a consequence of living in north Queensland. Many films never travelled beyond the Brisbane line, or anywhere else in regional Australia for that matter. I thought I should work on one of the relatively small number of films which dealt with relations between Aborigines and settler Australians. I had recently re-seen *Jedda* (Charles Chauvel, 1955) with great interest but eventually decided upon Fred Schepisi's second feature, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) which dramatises the life of Jimmy Governor, the part-Aboriginal bushranger hanged for murder in New South Wales in 1901. The narrative derives from Thomas Keneally's 1972 novel of the same name which, in turn, dramatises an already much altered version of Governor's life and the events leading to the massacre and violent rampage in which altogether twelve white people were murdered, raped or seriously injured.

I had seen the film when it was first released but had little distinct memory of my thoughts about it. That in itself surprised

me a little. I had also written an article on the novel in a literary journal comparing it with the real life story of Jimmy Governor and I realised that I must have been writing it about the same time I had seen Schepisi's film.¹ Perhaps more to the point was my long interest in the question of frontier conflict and the abiding problem of dealing with violence in Australian history—an issue which is as alive today as it had been a generation ago. My first publication dealing with the question, 'Violence, the Aboriginals and the Australian Historian', had appeared in the journal *Meanjin* a few months after the publication of Keneally's novel.² Much more recently I had given a lot of thought to the question of inter-racial mixture, or miscegenation, and had researched relevant attitudes and policies in both Australia and overseas, work which resulted in the publication of *Nowhere People* in 2005. The book had been partly motivated by my family's discovery of Aboriginal ancestry. Indeed my Tasmanian grandfather and my mixed descent grandmother had married in Sydney in September 1900 when the local papers were printing daily bulletins on the continuing pursuit for Jimmy and his younger brother Joe, or the 'Breelong Blacks' as they were often called when they were on the run.

So I returned with renewed interest to both the film and the novel sharpened by the extensive reporting of the mass shooting at the Virginia Tech which was inescapable in the days during which I began writing with assorted experts advancing theories as to the reasons for such massacres of the kind unleashed by Jimmy Governor in July 1900.³

When I responded to the unexpected invitation I pleaded that my whole career had been concerned with words rather than images and that my response to the film would have to be that

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of an historian, that I could not slough off a lifetime of analysis and exegesis. I also knew too much about the career of Jimmy Governor to look at the film with eyes innocent of the actual historical context. I explained that I would be unable to avoid judging the film as I would an historical work in its own right and to think as well about both novel and film as artefacts of their own time and see them in a broader political and intellectual context. It was obvious to me that they must both be seen as characteristic products of the 1970s which saw dramatic changes in the way in which White Australia regarded Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and the way in which they saw themselves.

The campaign for the 1967 Referendum was a highly successful exercise in consciousness-raising, the massive majority for the two changes to the constitution indicating the great weight of opinion seeking a new relationship between white and black. Australia had by then been under constant international pressure to dismantle the machinery of discrimination as the non-European countries captured the majority in the General Assembly of the United Nations. New intellectual currents were swirling through Australian society at the same time. The celebrated 1968 Boyer Lectures, *After the Dreaming*, by the eminent anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner challenged the country's historians to break the 'Great Australian Silence' and to come to terms with the fraught and, all too often, hidden history of European-Aboriginal relations. From 1970, as if responding, Charles Rowley published his ground-breaking trilogy, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, *The Remote Aborigines* and *Outcasts in White Australia*. The failure of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land to gain recognition of their land rights in the so-called Gove Land Rights Case in the Northern Territory Supreme Court in 1971 stimulated both

intense scholarly and political activity leading up to the passage of *The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. The Aborigines themselves burst onto the central stage of national and even international politics with the establishment of the Tent Embassy on the Parliament House lawns in January 1972 and the first unfurling of the Aboriginal flag.

Thomas Keneally's novel, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, published in April 1972, was remarkably timely. It was launched at a moment when the community was on the eve of significant political change, when Aboriginal issues were more prominent than ever before and when racism was a focus of both national and international attention. 1971 had been chosen as the United Nations International Year for Action to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination.

Schepisi, a close friend of Keneally, read the novel before it was published and was immediately interested in adapting it for cinema. The two friends had much in common including a Catholic upbringing and training as seminarians. They had collaborated on the script for Schepisi's first fiction film, a 30-minute segment entitled *The Priest* for the episodic feature *Libido* (1973) which earned them a Silver Award from the Australian Film Institute. Although uncredited, Keneally had assisted on the screenplay of Schepisi's first feature, *The Devil's Playground* (1976) in which he was also cast in a small but significant role as a priest. Schepisi acquired the rights to Keneally's novel and crafted the script which Keneally then commented on. Their close collaboration continued as the novelist flew with Schepisi and the cinematographer, Ian Baker, across central New South Wales looking for locations and Keneally was cast in a cameo role. When asked why he had been attracted to his friend's novel Schepisi replied:

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The subject matter, I think it is a great story, one that is extremely relevant today. I believe it is the kind of story that can reach people on a mass level, and also say something that needs to be said in this country.

I really set out to make a picture for a lot of people—too often film-makers make movies for the already converted, and I thought my film would have enough excitement to capture the imagination of a wide public, especially at this time in Australia.⁴

Schepisi said on several occasions that he valued the integrity of the text of the novel and, given its critical and popular success, he believed his film would carry an important message into the heartland of the nation.

The front credits give audiences two vital pieces of information—that it is ‘from the novel by Thomas Keneally’ and is ‘based on real events’. What is not mentioned is that Keneally took much of his story from Frank Clune’s 1959 book, *Jimmy Governor*, although he subsequently carried out research of his own. But what we have is, as writer and film critic Robert Drewe realises, ‘a thrice-told tale’—real events refracted through the visions of Clune, then Keneally, then Schepisi.⁵ It is a complex situation but one that has its foundation on the actual lives of the two brothers of mixed descent, Jimmy and Joe Governor, and their sudden violent emergence from obscurity in the second half of 1900 in central and northern New South Wales.

Neither film-makers nor novelists should be imprisoned in an iron cage of actual historical events. They have every right to use them creatively in order to shape their own vision of the past—to invent, to travel beyond the known events and into the minds and hearts of their own creations whether based on real people or not. But in the case we are considering it seems necessary to refer to the



Close friends and creative collaborators: Fred Schepisi and Thomas Keneally on location.

actual events and characters because both Schepisi and Keneally rest the validity, cogency and immediate relevance of their work on its relationship with the known and recorded past. Schepisi adopted Keneally's device of distancing himself from the actual historical events and in particular by re-naming the main characters. Thus Jimmy and Joe Governor become Jimmie and Mort Blacksmith, Jimmy's wife, Ethel (née Page), is renamed Gilda (née Marshall), the Mawbey family for whom Governor worked and most of whom were murdered are the Newbys, the schoolteacher Helena Kerz, also murdered, is Petra Graf, and so on.⁶ Other changes, not always so small or subtle, were also made and are discussed later.

Who, then, were the Governor brothers? What sort of society did they grow up in?