

ABSTRACT

Revealing the activities of the Methodist Missionary Society through film

Over the past 10 years the State Library of NSW has undertaken a massive digital preservation project including a focus on the Library's moving image collections. More than 250 film and video collections have been identified for digitisation, using uniqueness, significance, physical condition and playback equipment obsolescence as criteria for selection.

The records of the Sydney-based Methodist Missionary Society Methodist Overseas Mission (M.O.M.) of Australasia were deposited with the Mitchell Library in the early 1950s with further additions over time. The organisation later became known as the Methodist Overseas Mission. Their extensive collection includes over 300 manuscript boxes, photographs, slides, negatives, and 110 film reels.

The Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia set up several Missions in the North of Australia from 1916. Their mission at Milingimbi Island, among the Yolngu people of Eastern Arnhem Land, was begun in 1923 and continued operating up to 1974.

In 1964, the work of the M.O.M at Milingimbi was featured in the Society's commissioned film *Faces in the Sun* (1964). The documentary highlighted the experiences of four different communities in the Northern Territory.

Directed by Cecil Holmes, *Faces in the Sun*, like many of the films produced by the M.O.M, is an insight into the Stolen Generations era. They were of course proselytising Christianity but also reflected the Australian Government's assimilationist policies.

There are projection prints and second-generation copies of this film scattered in various libraries around the country. However, the first-generation original master material held, and now digitised, by the Library, is a unique and valuable record that captures the high-quality detail of the director's original intent. As well as documenting an important time in the history of the Northern Territory and Australia.

Revealing the Activities of the Methodist Missionary Society Through Film

The theme for this year's ALIA conference is "diversity," a highly inspirational societal goal in the modern Australian context.

Dealing with historical items from library collections, however, provide a constant reminder of how diversity, whether in thinking or culture, has not always been encouraged and appreciated. Recent work digitising the film collections at the State Library of NSW has offered a valuable insight into former Australian attitudes, government policies and religious amelioration that is at odds with contemporary ideas about diversity.

The State Library of NSW holds the records of the religious group formerly known as the Methodist Overseas Mission (MOM). The Methodist Overseas Mission was a department of the Methodist Church of Australia, founded around 1930. It was formerly known as the Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia. MOM established and managed four missions in the Northern Territory – Goulburn Island, Milingimbi, Yirrkala and Elcho Island. The Methodist Overseas Mission ceased in 1977 when it became part of the Uniting Church of Australia.

Methodist Missions in the Northern Territory

There were several Christian missions established in the Northern Territory, beginning with the Lutherans at Hermannsburg in 1877. By the late 1950s there were 14 Aboriginal missions in operation and although church-run, all received subsidies from the Federal Government.

The first mission established in the Northern Territory by the Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia, later known as the Methodist Overseas Mission, was on Goulburn Island in 1916. It was located on South Goulburn Island. Dormitories for

children operated until the mid-1930s and children attended a Mission school. Control of the Mission was not handed to the local Aboriginal Community until 1973. Another mission was established on Elcho Island in 1921 but was closed in 1923 when oil drilling began. It was re-opened in 1942. Self-government was established at Elcho Island Mission in the mid-1970s and it ceased to operate as a mission. The town located at the mission site is known today as Galiwin'ku.

A mission was started on Milingimbi Island in 1922. The mission operated a dormitory for boys until the mid-1930s. A school was run at the mission from 1935. The Methodist Overseas Mission ran Milingimbi until 1974.

Their mission at Yirrkala began in 1935. People from 13 different clans in the surrounding area came to the mission over time. In the mid-1970s the church handed control of the mission to the Yirrkala Dhanbul Community Association and Yirrkala ceased to operate as a mission.

***Faces in the Sun* film**

Faces in the Sun was shot between 1962 and 1964. Released in 1964, it is a 16 mm, black and white, narrated documentary, presented by the Methodist Overseas Mission. It was produced by Richard Mason and directed by humanitarian Cecil Holmes

This film features four stories of Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory. These stories present some issues that the featured individuals strive to deal with, some aspects of traditional Aboriginal life and culture, and some interaction between the Aboriginal people and the missionaries and other white people. The first story, 'Gawin and his family', is about Aboriginal people associated with the Methodist Mission at Yirrkala in Arnhem Land. The second and third stories, 'Gwiwinga' and

'Stephen' are about Aboriginal people associated with the Methodist Mission on Elcho Island. The fourth story, 'Djawa', is about Aboriginal people associated with the Methodist Mission on the island of Milingimbi.¹

At the time of release, *Faces in The Sun* received a mixed reception, one reviewer called it “pretty pictures” and “comfortable propaganda” after it screened on ABC TV in 1965². Yet it was one of only two films to win a coveted Gold Award at the Australian Film Institute annual award ceremony in 1965³

Djawa

Yolngu man Tom Djawa was a leading figure among the Milingimbi community. A celebrated artist and senior knowledge holder. Djäwa valued the interest and respect he was shown by balanda (whitefellas) in matters of culture and Yolngu life, and it is telling that he worked with so many visitors who made their way to Milingimbi for a variety of reasons.

Djäwa had lead roles in two documentary films made by Cecil Holmes, *Faces in the Sun* (1964) and *Djalambu* (1964), which offers a re-enactment of the final burial ceremony for his father, Narritjnarritj. He also appeared in a documentary on bark painting made in 1972. Djäwa worked with teacher and linguist Beulah Lowe and assisted numerous anthropologists who visited the island, including Ronald and Catherine Berndt and Ian Keen. He became an experienced teacher of bark painting technique on the island.

¹ National Film and Sound Archive Search the Collection Catalogue <http://colsearch.nfsa.gov.au/nfsa/search/display/display.w3p;adv=no;page=0;query=Faces%20in%20the%20Sun%20Media%3A%22FILM%22;rec=1;resCount=10>

² Canberra Times Tues July 13th 1965. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/105760550>. Page 15

³ Canberra Times Friday May 21st, 1965. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/105844787>

He clearly saw the benefit in sharing his unique expertise and world view with interested parties and records of such collaborations such as those found in the films and publications provide an image of a figure who looms larger than life, someone revered within the community and deeply respected outside of it.

The Australian Film Industry in 1964

Australian film makers have always been innovators and early adopters. In fact, a religious themed film *Soldiers of the Cross* made in 1900 by the Salvation Army, is widely acknowledged as the first feature film made in the world.⁴ Australian film making was prolific in those early days with 115 films made between 1900 and 1913.

But for the 40 years following 1913 (and in fact right up to the 1970s with the government supported renaissance of the Australian film industry), the industry was characterised by “boom and bust” as David Stratton suggests in his 1990 book *the Avocado Plantation*.⁵

Australia’s independent film industry had suffered under the dominance of films made by the Hollywood studio system. It was further complicated by cartels of foreign (mainly US and UK) ownership of the distribution and exhibition networks. Such that by the time of the making of *Faces in The Sun* the independent Australian feature film industry was almost non-existent.

Throughout this time however and particularly post WW2, religious groups were less concerned with commercial viability. This was because they had their own inbuilt distribution and exhibition networks in the form of churches and Sunday schools.

⁴ Australian film 1900 – 1977 A guide to Feature Film Production, Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, Oxford University Press 1998

⁵The Avocado Plantation Boom and Bust in the Australian Film Industry.
<https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/74VvjR6qONLd>

Passionate and progressive ministers saw an answer to the church's declining attendance patterns and began employing the powerful technology of "Gospel by film" in their churches.⁶

The Methodist Overseas Mission as well as buying in a few overseas productions also made and distributed home-grown films documenting their works on the missions. These films ranged from home movies shot by pastors to quality documentaries with high production values such as *Faces in The Sun*.

***Faces in the Sun* film makers**

The director of *Faces in the Sun*, Cecil Holmes was a renowned field documentarian of the time. His approach to filmmaking shows a humanitarian and an innovator with a sympathetic attitude towards his indigenous subjects.

His autobiography *One Man's Way* was published in 1986. It details his long involvement in left leaning causes.

Born in New Zealand in 1921. He became enchanted with film sometime between 1943 and 1945, when on leave from the Royal New Zealand Navy, he visited Denham Studios in London.

Other early influences were the UK documentary *Night Mail* (1936) and Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935).⁷ We can see these early influences in *Faces in The Sun*.

⁶ PIX Volume 19, No. 11 March 15 1947 page 26. https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-428592781/view?sectionId=nla.obj-469042919&fbclid=IwAR1_vPydhHuCYHW0nc9G908EhxBguvolwrZ1Xd7ioKc5MxCU9qWBILQZkxs&partId=nla.obj-428606125#page/n25/mode/1up

⁷ Australian Dictionary of Biography. <https://labouraustralia.anu.edu.au/biography/holmes-cecil-william-27207>

He left the navy after WW2 and joined New Zealand's National Film Unit where his advocacy for social justice became apparent, He was a committed unionist, communist and passionate film maker.

He moved to Sydney in 1949 and directed the award-winning documentary, "I The Aboriginal", the first documentary to give a voice to an Indigenous Australian. He had a profound influence on Australian documentary film making and in fact the Australian Directors Guild's prestigious documentary film award is named in his honour.

We can see in *Faces in the Sun* a socially committed director ahead of his time with a bold approach to life and film making.

Whilst still using voice over narration, provided by MOM to deliver the message regarding the mission's work, Holmes' film's style additionally borrowed techniques from dramatic narrative film. It is far from the traditional ethnographic documentary film making found in the rest of the Methodist Overseas Mission film collection.

Holmes employed devices such as dramatic re-enactments, elaborately rehearsed tracking shots, character-based close-ups, and point of view shots to aid the audience in engaging with the perspectives of the four lead characters in *Faces in the Sun*.

Also, most importantly his subjects recognised in him a sympathetic filmmaker and he was able to build trust such that he was permitted to film ceremonies and even at one point the trajectory and grief displayed at the death of a baby in the first story of *Faces in the Sun*.

He cleverly utilised the music of the location, recorded by his collaborator and wife as musical score to aid dramatic effect.

Holmes' wife and co-creator Sandra Le Brun's book *Faces in the Sun: Outback Journeys* (Published 1999)⁸ shows her early motivations as a film maker and sound recordist. Born in 1924, as a child she was a welcomed playmate to Indigenous children on a sheep station on the NSW/SA border.

Later, after WW2, as a young adult, she made it her mission to highlight the injustice of the government assimilation policies of the time, particularly how children were being taken from their families and incarcerated on missions. She visited many missions and later in her public lectures, performed the dances she had learned there and played her recordings of songs sung by grieving parents whose children had been removed.

On moving to Sydney, she met Cecil Holmes and together they made films on indigenous life and culture for the ABC and for the Methodist Overseas Mission.

Methodist Overseas Mission records held SLNSW

The Uniting Church is the third largest Christian denomination in Australia. The Uniting Church came into being on 22 June 1977, after three denominations - Congregational Union in Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia, and the Presbyterian Church of Australia - joined together. In 1985 the Uniting Church formed the special interest group called the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

The records of the Uniting Church in Australia held by the State Library of NSW, incorporating the records of Methodist Overseas Mission, are extensive and

⁸ *Faces in the Sun: Outback Journeys* / Sandra Le Brun Holmes.
<https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/74VvrlbQPvZg>

complex. It includes more than 430 boxes of manuscript material as well as a significant photographic and film archive.

The various collections have been received by the Library in several consignments since the 1970s, most recently in 2018. The Church maintains access, requiring permission before being viewed in the Library's reading room.

M.O.M. Films

In 1983 The State Library of NSW received a variety of formats in an acquisition from the Uniting Church. Amongst the paper and photographic records were 16 boxes containing 110 x 16 mm motion picture film items. Of these 110 film items there were 68 rolls (or sometimes plastic bags stuffed full of loose film strips) made by the Methodist Overseas Mission⁹.

Ultimately there was found to be 27 stand-alone titles from the Methodist Overseas Mission, including titles such as *Whither Bound*, *Man of Two Worlds*, *Like a Boab Tree*, and of course *Faces in the Sun*. We will be discussing the restoration of *Faces in the Sun* in more detail.

Moving Image and the State Library Digital Excellence Programme

In 2012 the Library received NSW Treasury funding to renew its aging digital technology platform, update critical business systems and to begin an ambitious 10-year program to digitise, preserve and make accessible iconic and at-risk heritage collections.

⁹ Uniting Church Inventory found in box 15 of donation to State Library of NSW (later known as Pic Acc 5393) and State Library of NSW Audiovisual Survey 2016/2017.

Known as the Digital Excellence Program, it is shortly to end but over the last 10 years the program has created over 13 million master files, from 15 different physical collection formats.

In 2018, a moving image specialist (Annie Breslin) began the task of gleaning content details, checking other archives and the Library's holdings to eliminate copies and preparing the unique films and videos for digital preservation.

We concentrated most of our efforts on the motion picture films as that was where the greatest wins in terms of content were to be found. It was also found that more than 95% of our films were on cellulose acetate film stock and had some degree of vinegar syndrome deterioration.

Annie and a team of dedicated conservation staff were in a race against time to get the films digitised.

We assessed films for condition and content information to help in selecting which of the Library's 1500 films to prioritise for digitisation.

All the motion picture films underwent a rigorous vetting process by the selection committee to arrive at a short list of 500 films to be digitised in the name of preservation.

Unsurprisingly it was ascertained that many of the MOM films within the Uniting Church collection were significant, unique, of interest to the people of NSW or Australia and its territories, and at risk of deterioration. In fact, they were considered some of the most unique and significant moving image items held by the State Library of NSW.

After digitisation there was in some instances, a re-mastering process required to choose which was really the best looking and best sounding source and to sync the chosen image and sound components together.

One of the films that received a significant amount of remastering was the MOM film, *Faces in the Sun*.

Technical restoration:

The process.

The inventory of the physical items held by The Library showed 70 items associated with the title *Faces in the Sun*.

As well as having all the offcuts and out takes (the material not used in the finished film) which was discounted straight away, we had several possible master image and sound components to use to recreate the film.

The trick was to choose the best quality components to master the finished film.

It is important to note here that unlike the digital copying we enjoy today, in the past, when films were made on celluloid, every new iteration meant an analogue copy was made and thus quality was degraded each time. These iterations are called “generations”.

50 years after the analogue birth of *Faces in the Sun*, the Library was digitally remastering the film, using the best analogue components available.

(For details regarding the master analogue image and sound components options for remastering of *Faces in the Sun*, see Appendix 1)

After viewing and listening to all our options we combined our chosen components to re-master the film so that it closely resembles what audiences of the time would have seen.

Technical standards for the digitisation of motion picture films at The State Library of NSW

In collaboration with the Project Coordinator (Hamilton Churton) and Digital Media Technical Analyst (Damian Cassidy), a 23-page technical specifications document was developed. A basic overview of this highly complex and library specific document can be summarised with the following.

- DPX 4K scans for 35 mm gauge films
- DPX 2K scans for 16mm, 8mm, super 8 and 9.5mm gauge films
- The film frame is over-scanned showing the optical sound area and the sprocket area.
- The incredibly large DPX files will later be transcoded to FFv1 in a matroska wrapper using RawCooked software, saving 30 – 50% on file storage.

Now that we at the tail end of this film digitisation project there have been so many lessons learnt.

Apart from rare deviations, in general the Library chose to use a combination of inhouse scanning for our 16 mm films (most of our collection) and a few 35 mm films. We used outsourced providers for one 35 mm nitrate film and all our small gauge films. This approach has worked well for the Library's film digitisation project.

Assimilation and Government Policy in the Northern Territory around 1964

The policy of assimilation implemented by the Commonwealth government in the Northern Territory, and throughout Australia, continues to have profound consequences for First Nations peoples.

Many of the firsthand effects of assimilation are evident in the 1964 documentary *Faces in the Sun*.

Digital preservation efforts such as the Digital Excellence Program undertaken by the State Library are providing valuable and more readily accessible opportunities for the public to investigate the past. Digitisation of the Library's film collection is giving a timely insight into the experiences of First Nations peoples.

Appendix 1

Master analogue image and sound components options for remastering of *Faces in the Sun*

The options available to us were:

Option 1. The incomplete and ungraded first-generation A, B, C and D rolls. This is the actual film that was run through the camera, later edited together but chequerboarded onto 4 different rolls in preparation for creating optical effects such as dissolves, wipes and intertitles. These A, B, C, D rolls have no grading or completed opticals and they hold no soundtrack.

Option 2. The Duplicate Negative – this is the second generation copy of these A, B, C and D rolls printed onto a single roll of film. This has all the grading and opticals, just as the film maker intended and being an intermediate master is usually kept in pristine condition, but it still holds no soundtrack

Option 3. We had two release prints of *Faces in the Sun*. Release prints are the third-generation copies made from the duplicate negative. Release prints do have an optical soundtrack but are of a lesser quality. They are notoriously scratched, have frames torn and removed and show wear and tear from being run on projectors. For other moving image collections, the release print is often all a Library holds but for the MOM films we knew they had carefully kept all their master components for most of their productions so we searched for the separate sound components looking for the best most complete high quality sound source we could find to sync up to Option 2 - the duplicate negative.

We did find the master film sound in 2 different iterations - as a standalone optical film sound positive and a standalone optical film sound negative. Because of the

non-standard methodologies employed in the post-production path of this film it was difficult to tell which of these was the first-generation sound.

At this point we needed to choose between the optical sound pos or the optical sound neg and we did this in a highly unscientific way. We listened to both versions and chose the one that sounded best – the one with the fullest frequency range. The film sound optical negative was the winning option.