

Report by L.S. Lake on the Film Activities of the  
Commonwealth National Library, Canberra, Australia

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very glad to be here in Antibes to represent the Commonwealth National Library of Australia as an observer at this the 13th Congress of the International Federation of Film Archives - and on behalf of Mr. H.L. White, Librarian of the National Library, I would like to thank your Secretary General, M. Langlois, for his kind invitation to participate.

We in Australia are very conscious of the physical distance which separates us from the countries of Europe and which has isolated us from the main stream of European culture. We appreciate very much, therefore, those influences which have tended to diminish this distance and we recognize the film as not the least of these. Australians have always been keen patrons of the cinema and our film history dates from 1896, when the following appeared in a Sydney newspaper: "The cinematograph continues to be the principal source of boom at the Tivoli Theatre...What is badly needed now is some device whereby the machine can be connected with the telegraph and made to represent the events while they happen..." Thus the SYDNEY Bulletin of October, 3rd 1896 wrote of a film of the MELBOURNE Cup and with prophetic vision for the television which was to come 60 years later.

The film incidentally was shot by M. N. Sestier who was the representative in Australia of the Lumiere Brothers. I understand that this film is still preserved in the Cinematheque Francaise in Paris.

It was the film as a record of history that first attracted the attention of the National Library and during the 1930's it collected some thousands of feet of current newsreels as well as a limited number of early Australian factual films.

When the Australian National Film Board was established in 1945 the National Library became the non-theatrical distribution agency for its productions. It was then that a Film Division was formally constituted within the Library to serve both as a film library and as an archive. The National Library functions as a Department of the Commonwealth Government and in recent years the allocation of funds for the purchase of films has been £8,000 per annum.

Its film collections are threefold:

Firstly, it is building up a comprehensive collection of documentary films in 16 mm., both Australian and those from overseas countries. Prints are acquired by purchase, gift and exchange and in addition overseas governments have been encouraged to deposit in the Library negatives from which prints are made available at cost to organizations throughout Australia and especially to the State Government film libraries in each of the six states. The Library at present possesses some 600 negatives.

Its collection of 16 mm. prints numbers some 5,000 and these are freely lent in two ways:

- (a) Directly: to agencies of the Commonwealth Government throughout Australia and to voluntary organizations and institutions in the Commonwealth Territories, e.g., Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory of Australia, Territory of Papua and New Guinea and Norfolk Island.



(b) Indirectly: to film societies, education institutions and other organizations in the states who may borrow National Library films through the State Government film libraries and Education Departments in each state. About 1,000 prints are lent each month, there is no hire charge but the borrower is responsible for return freight.

In all cases borrowers must satisfy the Library that their screenings are entirely non-commercial and that no charges are made for admission.

Secondly, it is assembling a collection designed to illustrate the origin and development of the film both technically and as a medium of artistic expression. This collection comprises nearly 200 titles, most of which have been acquired on indefinite loan through the courtesy of the British Film Institute. These films are lent to voluntary groups throughout Australia for the serious study of film art and history.

Here again it is a strict condition that all screenings shall be entirely non-commercial.

The Library also preserves some 25,000 still pictures from films produced between 1894 and 1938. This collection was a gift from Mr. H.J.C. Taussig who recently came to Australia after many years of experience in the European film industry. It is planned to add to this collection as opportunity arises.

Selections from this stills collection have been displayed from time to time and especially at the film festivals at Sydney and Melbourne.

The third collection is designed to illustrate the development of the film in Australia, and to reflect aspects of Australian life and achievement.

Here will be found films produced for the Australian National Film Board by the Department of the Interior Film Unit and most of those produced by other Commonwealth Government authorities and by the State Governments. It also includes a number of Australian commercial productions, both factual and feature, as well as Australian newsreels. Recent feature productions like the Overlanders, Eureka Stockade and Bush Christmas and documentaries such as the Shell Company's "Back of Beyond" may not be lent or copied because of copyright restrictions, but may be used in the Library's theatre for study purposes.

It has been possible, however, to make negatives from older films. Negatives and master positives are always made on 35 mm. film and it is usual to distribute 16 mm. prints. Some of the early factual films are:

- (a) "The inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia" made in Sydney in 1901.
- (b) "The Landing of the Duke and Duchess of York in Melbourne to open the First Federal Parliament in 1901" made in Melbourne in 1901.
- (c) "The naming of Canberra, 1913", a film which depicts the very birth of Australia's Federal Capital City.
- (d) "The Opening of Federal Parliament House in Canberra in 1927".

Extracts from these and other Australian factual films were used by the Department of Interior Film Unit in making the film, "Cavalcade of Australia" in 1952 to celebrate the jubilee of Australian



The most outstanding early Australian feature film in the Library's collection is "The Sentimental Bloke".

This was made in 1919 for an Australian company by Raymond Hollis Longford who made some 40 of the 160 feature films produced in Australia before the coming of sound. It is a presentation on film of the famous verse narrative of the Australian poet, C.J. Dennis. The story is presented with feeling and simplicity, with extracts from the verse as captions. Natural settings are used throughout and the production is noteworthy for its integrity and complete lack of sophistication. The cast led by Arthur Tauchert, Gilbert Emery and Lottie Lyall portray the rich human feeling of the poem with sincerity and humour and an economy of gesture and subtle use of expression which is quite remarkable. The film achieved considerable success in its day and deserves a place among film classics of the world.

To avoid an accusation of national bias permit me to quote a contemporary reviewer writing not in an Australian newspaper but in the Glasgow Citizen (Scottish paper) in 1920: "Congratulations to the /English Distributing Company/ for the Sentimental Bloke...they have secured what is in my opinion the finest new film of the year and one which will prove a certain Box Office winner wherever shown. This simple story is merely a straightforward account of how an Australian larrikin was turned into an honest working man through his love for Doreen who worked in a pickle factory...but it is so full of mingled beauty, pathos, humour and humanity and is so free from false sentiment and any kind of affectation that it is absorbing from start to finish. The film is described as Australia's first screen classic. America in all the years she has been engaged in film producing has never turned out anything better."

The Library has not traced many of Australia's early feature films, but its researches have produced interesting evidence of great vitality and experimental activity, for instance, in the early use of the close-up, in the use of natural settings and in interior photography. It does possess stills of those films made for the Salvation Army by J.H. Perry from 1901-1903 - "The Early Christian Martyrs" and "Soldiers of the Cross" and of the "Kelly Gang" which, as a feature film of over 40 minutes in length, must have been unique at the time it was made in 1905-6.

Most of Australia's early feature films dealt exclusively with Australian themes and this may explain why they are so little known overseas, although we know that some did achieve world-wide distribution. But, it is surely interesting to observe the development of the film in Australia, parallel as it were, with that in those countries whose film history is well known. It may even be found that Australia has a contribution to make to the history of the film.

The Library is aware of the existence of some private collections, both of Australian and overseas films and is negotiating terms under which they may be copied. In this it has concentrated on the former since it is less likely that they have survived in other countries.

In all its film activities it has co-operated closely with organizations in the states and has initiated several interstate conferences between the Commonwealth and State Governments. It has also sought the co-operation of the Film Industry and it is, indeed, encouraging to hear in Miss Duncan's letter which has just been read to the Congress of the recent success in this direction. It is to be hoped that the formation of auxiliary committees in the states will hasten the programme for collecting and copying of early films.



In addition to its collection of film the Commonwealth National Library possesses many books dealing with film history and criticism and offers an information service for film groups, festival committees, etc., throughout Australia.

It has published a printed catalogue of its holdings of documentary films and catalogue cards for recent acquisitions are distributed.

It has also made some progress towards preparing a complete catalogue of all Australian film productions. A preliminary descriptive list of all factual films produced in Australia since 1940 has been issued in roneo form and details of most of the earlier films are recorded in its card catalogues. It is hoped that this will eventually form the basis of a printed catalogue of Australian films.

In concluding this brief summary of the film activities of the National Library I would like to express once again, our appreciation of the opportunity to take part in this Conference of FIAPF and to express the hope that our association with FIAPF may be closer in the future than it has been in the past.