Barry, Mick and Kenny: Bloke-heroes in Australian Cinema

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ABSTRACT: The New Australian Cinema in the early 1970s commenced with what was to become the defining portrayal of the Aussie bloke—*The Adventures of Barry McKenzie.* McKenzie, instead of being embarrassing, was valorised as the folk image of the bloke. This article examines how in the four decades since, the bloke has been a constant in Australian cinema and the bloke-image has been confirmed and celebrated through such films as *Crocodile' Dundee* and *Kenny*.

If feature films are to be believed—not necessarily literally, although this may occasionally be the case —then they often can be valuable indicators of aspects of the *zeitgeist*. It is in this spirit, that I would like to suggest that the image of the Australian 'bloke' has changed in the broad folk context over the past several decades and that those changes can be charted by reference to the Australian cinema of the period. In particular, I would like to reference three major films (major in the sense of my present thesis rather than in and of themselves although that argument might be made in a more appropriately cinematic forum). They are *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Bruce Beresford, 1972), *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986) and *Kenny* (Clayton Jacobson, 2006).

Before considering these films specifically, I should note that the Australian cinema's interests in the Australian male as bloke is almost conterminous with the development of cinema in Australia. One of the first narrative films produced in Australia[1] concerned itself with Australian pre-eminent bloke-hero, Ned Kelly: *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906). The plethora of bushrangers films that followed—with or without historical figures at the core of their narratives—tended to emphasis, unsurprisingly, the contrary image of the bloke as heroic (or at least bold and daring) and criminal, more or less a refined version of the larrikin (a folk figure which contributed much to the attributes of the bloke).[2] With the suppression of the cinematic bushranger, the next and

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1 And, it is often argued, one of the first feature length (i.e. 60 minutes or more) narrative fictional films produced in the world, not a claim easy to validate although certainly there seem to be no American or British contenders for the title.

2 *Bloke* is, of course, not a term of Australian origin or exclusively Australia. But, as Sidney J. Barker points out in *The Australian language*: 'sometimes we find that...words acquire

potent representation of the bloke was the eponymous one: the first film version of C.J. Dennis's *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*, released as *The Sentimental Bloke* in 1919 (and again, in a sound version in 1932). Here, the larrikin aspects of the Australian bloke are firmly established and giving an air of respectability and 'normality' through the Bloke's conversion to or acceptance of community morality via romance and domesticity.

While an interesting study could be made of the fluctuating cinematic fortunes of the bloke (as a standard Australian folk image) throughout the 1930s, 1940s and (to a limited extent) in the 1950s Australian cinema, it is not my intention to do so here. But it is my contention that the bloke by no means dominated Australia films of these decades and is noticeable more through his rare appearances than through his persistence. These appearances were sustained on one hand by the comedian George Wallace (1894-1960), a crucial figure in the cinematic evolution of the bloke through his consistence portrayal of the Australian bloke as a working-class, good-hearted if dim-witted näif[3], and on the other by emblematic Australian actor Chips Rafferty (1909-1971), who reinstated some of the heroic qualities of the bloke while (often but not inevitably) confirming the simple or at least unsophisticated nature of the bloke.[4] The mention of these two actors is deliberate because aspects of the characters they played and something at least of the narratives of their films were to have considerable influence in the films I wish to consider here. Or if that implies too direct a connection then a subconscious effect through the very folk-image of the bloke they and their films had respectively tapped into and shaped.

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greater currency in Australia—are used among more varied classes and more continually—than they had in the their country of origin. *Bloke* and *cove* are cases in point'. (Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1970, 397) *Cove*, I would suggest, has largely disappeared from contemporary Australian speech, *bloke* is still there.

3 Wallace's films are, *His Royal Highness* (1932), *Harmony Row* (1933), *A Ticket in Tatts* (1934), *Let George Do It* (1938), *Gone to the Dogs* (1939) with lesser roles in *The Rats of Tobruk* (1944) and *Wherever She Goes* (1951). The influence of Wallace on providing some images or behaviours for a generation of Australian males—or perhaps the other way around—is a subject that deserves some study.

4 Rafferty's (or John William Pilbeam Goffage—his actual name) film career was more extensive and more varied than Wallace's. Nonetheless, he provided through a variety of roles, an image of the bloke as variously quintessentially Australian, heroic in those terms, with more than a touch of the Anzac about him. It is no coincidence then that Rafferty played the-bloke-as-soldier/larrikin in two formative films produced during the Second World War: *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940) and *The Rats of Tobruk* (1944) and confirmed that image (although not strictly a serviceman) in *The Overlanders* (1946). Fittingly, Rafferty's last feature film role was to play the police sergeant in *Wake in Fright* (1970), so in uniform again albeit a police uniform such he had also worn as a much more avuncular copper in two children's films: *Smiley* (1956) and *Smiley Gets a Gun* (1958), both British films made in Australia.

At the start of the 1970s, the moribund Australian film industry, rather unexpectedly[5], burst into life and with that sudden vitality the bloke returned with a vengeance. This was mainly due to *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* although it should be noted that *Wake in Fright* (mentioned in footnote 4 below), a particularly vicious demonstration of the 'horrors' of 'blokedom[6] and *Stork* (Tim Burstall, 1971) both predate *McKenzie* by about one year (in terms of release). *Stork* is significant in that it is the first appearance of the 1970s version of the bloke: the ocker. Barry McKenzie, however, predates Stork by a good half-decade through his comic-strip version, created by Barry Humphries for the British satirical magazine, *Private Eye*, in 1964. Whatever either of these earlier films may have said about the bloke, it was *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie,* it was 'Bazza' (the use of the distinctive diminutive is a strong indicator of bloke status) who captured the cultural condition of the bloke and indeed cemented it, cinematically at least, for at least a decade and a half and, as I shall argue with *Kenny*, even longer.

Because of the satirical intent, taken from the comic-strip origins, the bloke in *McKenzie* is clearly placed in the sub-category of the ocker, a particular cultural category only then coming into common parlance and nearly always as a pejorative. This is amply reflected by the uncertainties in definition and usage offered by *The Macquarie Dictionary*:

1. The archetypal uncultivated Australian working man.
2. A boorish, uncouth chauvinistic Australian.
3. An Australian male displaying qualities considered to be typically Australian, as good humour, helpfulness and resourceful.

The first two of these may well have been largely formed by the characteristics attributed to Barry McKenzie by the film, especially as the first edition of *The Macquarie Dictionary* did not appear until 1981 by which time the attitudes and behaviours of Barry McKenzie had either permeated the cultural mainstream or, if they pre-existed the film's (and Barry Humphries') exposure of them, been elevated out of the cultural background. Inescapably, Bazza fits the first two definitions, although there is some ambiguity about his being a 'working man'. Assuming a socio-economic sense to that term (the old distinction between wage and salary earners not that between those in paid employment and *rentiers*),

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5 Perhaps not all *that* unexpectedly as efforts to bring about a revival in Australian film production had been taking place during the 1960s in parallel with a general thrust towards a 'cultural renaissance' in Australia that included literature, theatre and the arts more generally. What was unexpected, although intensely lobbied for, was the degree of government - federal and state - involvement and support, even initiative.

6 *Wake in Fright* was 'rediscovered' in 2007 (it is also claimed the alleged last remaining print was found in 2002), re-realised in cinemas in 2009 and was acclaimed as a lost masterpiece—or in the terms of the popular cinema magazine *Empire*, a 'long-lost cinematic touchstone' and ' a certified Australian classic' (no.100, July 2009, p. 36)

then it is unclear where Bazza fits. The only indicator is a fleeting image of his home which looks solidly middle-class. For the rest of 1 and 2, this is Bazza to a T. The only part of 3 which applies to him is 'good humour'; 'helpfulness' is slightly present in his character, perhaps, but the film is resolute in his representation of a complete lack of resourcefulness—except perhaps for his organisation of a hose-gang of urinating Australians (ockers to a man) to put out a fire (they started, of course) in a BBC television studio.

No doubt intended to be caricature, if not full-blown satire, the representation of the bloke in *Barry McKenzie* emphasizes a catalogue of undesirable characteristics—undesirable that is from a *haut bourgeois* point of view, the view largely taken by the film's first reviewers. Bazza's two (indeed only) concerns in life are to guzzle as much beer (in the Australian icy-cold lager form not the British room-temperature ale variety), at which he is singularly successful, and 'featuring with a sheila' (having sex), at which he is singularly unsuccessful. The first of these leads inevitably to the need to urinate and regurgitate and it is these two functions that provide Bazza with the endlessly expressive euphemisms that, offered as poetically original, give an impression of the bloke (although perhaps not Bazza himself who does not seem to be coining them as much as drawing them from an well-used vocabulary) as an earthy wit. The sense of the Australian bloke being 'uncultivated' has shifted in this film beyond the possible sense of unsophisticated or even naive to simple-minded. For the purposes of comedy no doubt, Bazza is simple-minded almost to the point of being moronic (in both its literal and its colloquial senses). This serves the narrative purpose of allowing situations to be created in which fun can be had by sending up 'the poms' to a much greater extent than sending up Australians (although no doubt this was intended as well) with the (no doubt unintended) consequence that Barry McKenzie—bloke-as-ocker—became the acceptable, even acclaimed, face of Australian masculinity. As Sandra Hall astutely noted at the time of the film's release, 'the sentiments are closer to an updated Dad 'n' Dave. Bazza has lost his [comic strip] awfulness, with time and the transfer, and become over-fond folklore'.[7] A significant narrative aspect of the cinematic renditions of the bloke was established with *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, that of the journey overseas the undertaking of which provides a key arena in which the qualities of the bloke (positive and negative) can be displayed.

Cinematic representations of the bloke were confirmed as the renaissance of Australian cinema continued throughout the 1970 and into the 1980s, often despite the cultural cringe his existence (cinematically

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7 Sandra Hall, *Critical Business: The New Australian Cinema in Review* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1985), p. 10.

and socially) may have caused. Not all or even a predominant number of these were of the bloke-as-ocker, or bloke-as-clown since the ocker was usually presented as a figure of fun and ridicule; it seems that audiences were intended or expected to laugh *at* Barry McKenzie rather than *with* him. Bloke-as-folkhero—despite or because of the example of Barry McKenzie—followed in films such as *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), *Newsfront* (1978) both of which have the ordinary Australian working man as bloke-hero, and *Breaker Morant* (1980)[8] and, of course, *Gallipoli* (1981)[9] wherein the Anzac/digger image serves to enhance the bloke image and vice versa. In both these latter films, it should be noted, the narrative structure of overseas travel (historically necessary of course) is dominant. There are too many other renditions of the bloke in Australian cinema of the period to enumerate here but they, and Australian culture, were all leading to what remains perhaps as his finest cinematic flowering in the eponymous hero of *'Crocodile' Dundee* in 1986.

With Mick Dundee the ocker and hero version of the bloke met and melded. Of course, no small percentage of Dundee's status as a cultural (and, let's face it, fairy-tale) hero was due to his bushman qualities but his ocker characteristics are established from his first tumultuous appearance in the pub at Walkabout Creek. His bushman knowledge and skills are, seemingly paradoxically, what enable him to be an ocker when in New York.[10] Dundee is a much tamer version of the bloke-as-ocker than McKenzie—for instance, he certainly does not have McKenzie's obsession with beer drinking and its physiological consequences. What he does share with McKenzie is the narrative need to travel to and immerse himself in another culture. This time the United States of America rather than Britain, a choice which reflects both changes in Australian society and economic cinema reasons. New York serves much the same purpose in *'Crocodile' Dundee* as London does in *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*. It is a foreign (for Dundee) but familiar (for the audience) location in which his essential bloke/ocker characteristics can be clearly delineated—and, in the case, of Dundee valorised. Although Dundee's ocker credentials are displayed in the film's first few minutes (before heading into the Outback) and then, expressly, in New York, they begin to be modified when he returns to Australia. (McKenzie is barely seen to operate on his native turf.)

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8 The bloke in *Breaker Morant* is not the eponymous tragic hero, who was after all a educated English remittance man, but Lieutenant Peter Handcock, the larrikin victim of English duplicity.

9 As with *Breaker Morant*, the bloke is the larrikin-inspired character, Frank Dunne rather than the sacrificial hero, Archie Hamilton, a pure hero 'untainted' by most the characteristics of the bloke.

10 My fuller discussion of the importance of Mick Dundee as an Australian folk hero may be found in Neil Rattigan, 1988, '*"Crocodile" Dundee*: Apotheosis of the Ocker', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 15.4, 148-155.

Whereas McKenzie demonstrated and exaggerated the first two *The Macquarie Dictionary* definitions cited above, Dundee epitomises the third. And in so doing, his characterisation captured and even caused a shift away from the ocker aspects of the bloke, a lessening of his more objectionable qualities, or caused what might be argued to be a separation between the ocker and the bloke. The ocker-as-hero never was a stable image and perhaps could not be in the Australian cinema nor in the broader Australian culture. Mick Dundee was a single and important moment of stasis for the ocker but also he represented the ocker's incipient demise: if the ocker could be a hero (fairy tale hero in this case) then he could not be an ocker.[11]

The bloke was thus primed for a continued, even renewed, place of prominence in the Australian cinema. But this did not happen or at least not immediately. Oddly enough, the very financial success of *'Crocodile' Dundee* was a contributing cause to a downturn in Australian film production. It is sometimes argued that, amongst other factors, as *'Crocodile' Dundee* was produced and then made such huge profits under an extremely favourable tax concession regime, the taxation office was led to end those very concessions. It may have also been that Mick Dundee set the bar too high for other cinematic blokes to follow. Certainly it is hard to see much blokedom in, say, Scott Hastings, the hero of *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) or in Carl, the ineffectual, mother-dominated protagonist of *Death in Brunswick* (1991). (It may be argued the Muriel of *Muriel's Wedding* [1994] had most of the characteristics of the bloke save, obviously, for the gender.)

Coincidently (or not), there is as big a time-gap between *'Crocodile' Dundee* and *Kenny* as there was between *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* and *'Crocodile' Dundee*. The normalization of the bloke is accomplished in large part in *Kenny* by the use of the stylistics of the documentary, by being what is now known as a 'mockumentary'. This, by appearing to be an television-style observational documentary of the life and occupation of an ordinary Australian bloke, and not a dramatized narrative, has the effect of taking the aspects of the bloke as limned in *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* and '*Crocodile' Dundee* and giving them—or confirming them—as those of the everyday, ordinary Australian bloke. The film is, of course, not a documentary but a carefully crafted fiction masquerading, for the most part successfully, as reality.

The game is given away (if it was ever intended to be deceptive) by the fact that the film is really an elaborate and extended scatological

[11] In the broader social context, the ocker did fade from cultural prominence or, at least, transmuted into the 'hoon' and the 'bogan', re-emphasising thereby his (and increasingly, her) place at the periphery of social acceptability albeit maintaining a strong presence in Australian folklore.

joke. Kenny, the eponymous hero, frequently asserts he is a plumber and while that is true to an extent, his occupation is to supply and service portable lavatories. This provides (if the pun may be pardoned) an endless stream of scatological humour. In this, *Kenny* outdoes *Barry McKenzie* by several degrees of magnitude, and *Dundee* is left floundering in his wake. (There really is only once example of lavatory humour in *Dunde*e: a joke involving a bidet.) Scatological humour is the *raison d'être* of *Kenny* but, while often both obvious and ingenious, does mean the film's sense of being a documentary in undermined; Kenny is given very little interest in life (other than an interest in his family—something resolutely absent from Bazza and, until, the later additional films, from Dundee) beyond the specifics of his job and the type of plumbing it involves. Even so, and not only because of its mockumentary aesthetics, *Kenny* thoroughly humanises the bloke (or embeds him in the folklore). If McKenzie is the epitome of *Ockeri extremus* and Dundee of the fairy tale bloke-hero, Kenny is the unalloyed bloke; in British culture he would be the working-class hero. He is that popular if mythical creature, the bloke, trying to make a living within a peculiarly Australian notion of integrity and the fair go. He is the bloke as family man—or at least as a father and as a son (like many Australian males in recent films, he is divorced from his wife who makes his life a misery). And what makes him even more quintessential is that he is a victim. Not a tragic victim, as with the males of *Gallipoli* or *Breaker Morant*, nor even of his own Australian brand of stupidity as with Barry McKenzie (although the film does flirt dangerously with aspects of this characterisation) but, paradoxically, of his job and of his family. In other words, he is a victim of being an Australian male and, in this case, of being a bloke: it goes with the territory.

In *Kenny*, the trope of travelling overseas established in *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* and *'Crocodile' Dundee* also occurs and for much the same purpose and effect. As with Dundee, Kenny travels unexpectedly and not entirely of his own volition to the United States. Here he repeats many of Dundee's experiences and responses all of which serve to underline his bloke credentials while also, as with both his precursors, having his lack of worldliness seem like at best child-like simplicity, at worst as dimwittedness. Unlike McKenzie but like Dundee, Kenny befriends strangers without reservation or even consideration of their 'difference'; both Kenny and Dundee indeed overcome difference by being blind to it. Both Kenny and Dundee like Americans (and they like them) and America (even if confused by a lot of it) but retain their blokeness in the face of it. McKenzie retains his blokeness of course but dislikes the English (and they dislike him) and England up until, possibly, the last moment (after he has left).

Both McKenzie and Dundee are extreme examples—exaggerations and caricatures of the bloke. Kenny is a normalisation of and an indication of the acceptance and integration of the 'qualities' of Barry and Mick into the cultural mainstream definition and celebration of the bloke.

Kenny is a 'hero', all the more so when compared with the contemporary trend of depicting in the cinema the Australian male as feeble, ineffectual, even emasculated (save for a few truly criminal ones).[12] The crisis of masculinity arrived late in Australia or in the Australian cinema at least. *Kenny* is an attempt, perhaps, to head the crisis off, to restore the confidence in the bloke, or in the folk image of the bloke, once sounded so stridently by *Barry McKenzie* and *'Crocodile' Dundee*.

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Lead character from the movie Kenny *(2006).*

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12 I am tempted to encapsulate these films as depicting the bloke-as-wimp—the subject perhaps of an another analysis.