CHAPTER 18
ABC PEOPLE: THE MAKING OF EARLY DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS

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Abstract

This article is the first to examine the working lives of four former Australian Broadcasting Commission (later, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation) (ABC) documentary filmmakers and to explore their perspectives on working within the institution. It brings to light the creative pathways, and innovative contributions, to the evolution of ABC television documentary filmmaking made by Tom Manefield, Bill Steller, Storry Walton, and Max Donnellan, all of whom started their significant filmmaking careers in those formative years of ABC television between 1956 and 1960. Although Albert Moran (1989) argues that the "institutional voice" of the ABC overshadowed the voices of creative individuals within organisations such as Film Australia and the ABC, this chapter uncovers a complex symbiotic relationship among these filmmakers and the ABC, and reveals individual contributions worthy of substantial recognition, revelation, and discussion.

INTRODUCTION

According to the ABC, some of its earliest documentaries are *New Look at Papua Guinea* in 1959, *An Airman Remembers* and *Report from Queensland* in 1962, *The Pipes of Para* in 1963, *I, the Aboriginal* in 1964, *The Solitary Ones* and *Living on the Fringe* both from 1965 (ABC Documentary Catalogue, 2005). Indeed, the latter two are categorised specifically by the ABC as their earliest social documentary films. It was precisely during this period, while on a visit to England in 1965, Manefield saw the BBC social documentary program *Man Alive* and from that moment he was determined to make that type of documentary in Australia. Eventually, Manefield, Steller, and Walton worked on *Chequerboard*— described by Moran as the ABC's toughest and grittiest documentary series at the time (1989, p. 163)—which ran from 1969 to 1975. Donnellan worked concurrently on *A Big Country* which ran from 1969 to 1992.

Through face-to-face interviews, documenting not only their careers, but also their experiences making specific episodes of these programs, and by viewing, shot listing, and assessing these and others, evidence emerges as to the enormous emotional and creative contribution these early documentary filmmakers made to the development of ABC documentary. Because the

ABC was new at television documentary production, these men's history has influenced the history of the organisation's documentary culture. Contrary to Moran's argument that documentaries produced by Film Australia and the ABC speak with an institutional voice, this article focuses on the filmmakers in the early period of ABC television who actually created a voice that became, over time, the institutionalised voice. This article reveals the way the voice of the ABC documentary came into being.

For the most part, texts about the ABC concentrate on examining the organisation through its charter and editorial policy documents and from an organisational or management perspective. Little published research examines the contribution and work of ABC documentary filmmakers. For instance, historian Ken Inglis's *This is the ABC* (1983) and *Whose ABC?* (2006) document the history of the ABC, but only briefly mention ABC documentary filmmaking. In *Inside Australian Media*, Moran provides comprehensive historical information regarding the development and diversity of Australian media, in part focusing on television's introduction and adoption of established radio program scheduling, genres, artists, advertisers, resources, "and most especially its family audience" (Moran, 2000). Lansell and Beilby's *The documentary film in Australia* (1982) gives an historical view. Tim Bowden and Wendy Borchers's *50 years: Aunty's jubilee: Celebrating 50 years of ABC TV* (2006), Peter Luck's *50 years of Australian television* (2005), and Nick Place and Michael Roberts's *50 years of television in Australia* (2006) highlight the history of ABC television through archival images and remembrances. ABC investigative journalist Chris Masters's *Inside story* (1992) and former ABC producer and documentary filmmaker Robert Raymond's *Out of the box* (1999) document their experiences.

At different levels, these texts present substantial historical detail of the growth and change in organisational management, corporate politics, visual presentation, and the creation of television personalities through archival photography as well as through some anecdotal information, all of which fill out the ABC's rich television history. The products of that changing institution are also examined.

Moran's overview of Australian institutional documentary refers to the form as "a particular type of film, differentiated not so much by subject matter as by a specific context and approach" (1989, p. 150). He focuses on institutions such as Film Australia and the ABC and their long established foothold in documentary filmmaking and argues that institutional documentaries speak with "an institutional voice" in contrast to an independent one (1989, p. 151). An institutional voice, he writes, is that of an established organisation within a society, which promotes a particular cultural, educational, or public service perspective. Institutional documentaries attract little attention to their themes, style, sound and image qualities, or to their aesthetic qualities (Moran, 1989, p. 152). However, it is these themes, styles, sound and image qualities, and

aesthetic qualities within ABC documentary films created by its filmmakers, that this study reveals as contributing overall to the institution's significance as a producer of documentaries. Moreover, it is through the creative filmmaking skills of ABC documentary filmmakers that issues of social and cultural significance are examined. Moran argues that, "institutional documentaries speak with the collective and often anonymous voice of the body that gave rise to the film or program (the ABC, Film Australia, Crawford Productions and so on)" (1989. p. 151). In contrast, Moran explains, independent film "circulates in the name of its director" (1989, p. 151). Yet before the products of a cultural institution become anonymous and speak with a collective voice, as Moran asserts, a period of construction and negotiation of various perspectives takes place, a period of contestation, of gentle and not so gentle thrust and parry between individuals in the organisation, perhaps characterised as the creative impulse and the bureaucratic miasma.

Therefore, this article identifies, recognises and acknowledges the contribution of some of ABC television's most influential early documentary filmmakers, revealing their perspective through interviews, recollections, and remembrances. Their personal stories whilst working as television documentary filmmakers highlights the significance of early documentary programs on which they worked, such as *Chequerboard* and *A Big Country.*

CAREERS IN THE MAKING

The impact of working at ABC television in its years of development from the early 1950s and into the 1960s continues to resonate in the recollections of documentarists Walton, Steller, Donnellan, and Manefield. With minimal or no filmmaking experience, these men began working at ABC television during the early years, eventually becoming some of the most significant social documentary filmmakers in Australia. Walton reflected recently, that even though it was years since he had worked at the ABC, "I've done a hundred things since then, and yet, I still think of myself at the age of seventy, as an ABC person" (Walton, 2006). Similarly, Donnellan also revealed a lingering ABC connection: "We all say even though it sounds a bit funny, they were the best years of television.", Although they were faced with many challenges during the first twenty odd years, he maintains that "It was adventurous, every day was a different adventure" (Donnellan, 2006).

At one time a clerk in the Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Walton's heart was in theatre, music, and art, and in 1958, the ABC recruited him from Perth, Western Australia, as a Specialist Trainee (Drama and Features) to work in Sydney (S.Walton, personal communication, 22 March, 2006). The Drama and Features Department in 1958 combined both radio and television and his training was a one-week course in Melbourne with the BBC director Royston Morley (Walton, 2006), then a couple of days later he was

put straight into live production, working on up to seven programs a week in this traineeship period. "In the case of the ABC, you came in as a specialist trainee in a particular field, so you came in as a specialist trainee in drama and features, or you came in as a specialist trainee in Talks" (Walton, 2006). During a further two-year traineeship, each was assigned to a department, which then trained them to become producers/directors.. Trainees began working in the studios within three days of finishing their traineeship, and went "straight to the microphone, and straight to script editing" (Walton, 2006). Initially, the pool of trainees worked in every area of ABC television production, except the elite drama and opera programs for which "you had to earn your spurs" (Walton, 2006). Excellent opportunities arose for trainees to learn within the industry and "you really had to be pretty bloody stupid not to fulfil your possibilities" (Walton, 2006). The pool was where trainees were graded; each started as a grade one producer/director doing all types of work. "You got a fantastic amount of experience" (Walton, 2006). Career progression for trainees from grade one to five moved toward specialising: Walton (2006) remembered that "Grade five some never got to. Grade five was the top." At that level, producer/directors were working on drama and opera (Walton, 2006), meaning that only those most proficient at their craft would work on productions of major significance and expenditure. One of the characteristics of this training was that once the ABC made the investment, trainees were carried until they got better (Walton, 2006). Pressurised learning conditions and an air of urgency made people work quickly to do better next time. Flexibility was the key element in those early years of television: producer/directors might be working on film, documentaries and live television programs simultaneously (Walton, 2006).

With an already burgeoning love of photography, Steller arrived in Australia from India in 1948. One of his first jobs was as a camera repairer at Scales and Matthews and later, for a period, he managed the Royston Fairfax Studios in King Street, Sydney (Steller, 2006). Shortly thereafter, he took a job as a cadet darkroom assistant and a cadetship in photography for a company called Commercial Advertising: "That's when I started in photography" (Steller, 2006). Sometime later, a friend suggested he approach the Water Board for a job because they had two ex-RAAF photographers who would be able to teach all that he needed to know about photography. The Water Board provided him with a Bolex camera and the next nine years up until the late 1950s involved him in hours of painstaking work photographing plans and accidents. Eventually, he became the resident photographer on the development, building and construction of Warragamba Dam (Steller, 2006). "Now they wanted to do a movie report. Rather than the Board just sitting down and handing out the pictures looking at one another, they could sit back and look on a screen and they could get the report of what was happening at Warragamba Dam" (Steller, 2006). Steller credits his time at the Water Board as developing his innovation and experimentation in photographic work and he

taught himself to use a 16mm movie camera. At Warragamba Dam, Steller shot large amounts of footage of the dam's construction, which was included in a film with the working title *The dam builders,* which was later retitled *The Warragamba story (n.d.).* Around this time, John Heyer's film, *The back of beyond* (1954), inspired Steller to make documentary films. He recalls commenting at the time, "Hey! That's what it's all about" (Steller, 2006). In October 1960, after answering an advertisement for a cameraman and an assistant cameraman, Steller began working for ABC television as an assistant cameraman.

At seventeen, Donnellan found himself living in a Melbourne boarding house, dissatisfied with his job and heading for an unknown future. A football mate suggested he try for a job in television and gave him a contact. The job called for someone to work as a stagehand, which he thought sounded very interesting, fun, and exciting. Two weeks after applying for the job, Donnellan began work at ABC television on Monday, August 17, 1959, at 7.30 am. He still remembers as if it were yesterday, "because it changed my whole life, it gave me direction" (Donnellan, 2006). Recalling his early time working in ABC television, he describes it as a brilliant training ground: "The best teaching/training ground you could possibly get. You couldn't learn that sort of stuff out of books" (Donnellan, 2006). The trainee pool, he recalls, consisted of many floor managers, staging people, stage hands, props men, all on rosters and all involved in many different kinds of production, and at times the pool could consist of up to fifteen floor managers: "You were continually changing sets 24 hours a day almost 7 days a week" (Donnellan, 2006). On-the-set training comprised bringing in sets and putting sets behind people and flying in screens with different lighting on them; basically putting the set in, working the show, and pulling the set out again. Everything was live; rehearsals would be for a couple of days beforehand. Twenty-four hour rotation shift work became the norm. Working from 7.00 am until 3.30 pm, the studios would be set up for the day's jobs such as children's programs. The shift from 3.00 pm until 11.30 pm would come in and work the shows through the evening and the afternoon; and the shift from 11.00 pm until 7.30 am the next morning would come in and take out the sets during the night and put in those for the next day (Donnellan, 2006). This kind work proved to be the most exciting thing he had ever done: "I realised that I'd found my niche....I couldn't wait to come back to work the next day" (Donnellan, 2006). Multi-skilling became the norm; skills learnt included rigging the studios, putting the sets in, dressing the sets, and working with props, and as Donnellan emphasised, "If you showed any potential in any particular field you were given open opportunity to go and do that" (Donnellan, 2006).

During the first three or four years of ABC television, both Melbourne and Sydney were stand-alone stations; no coaxial cables linked the cities. Multi-skilling opportunities came about through a system by which the trainee moved, for example, from staging, then to props, then to a floor manager. Acting as the producer's

mouthpiece on the floor, the floor manager directed talent and set changes. From being a floor manager, one could progress to becoming a presentation controller, putting programmes to air, and running some of the station at night. From being a presentation controller, one could move up to being a studio supervisor in charge of the whole network transmission. With encouragement all the way, one could for instance act in a particular position for a twelve-month period before applying for permanency, or one could be placed in a position while someone was on leave. This might occur many times, but all the while, knowledge of the whole system was being gained thereby increasing prospects. By the end of his first four years, Donnellan had become a floor manager, and he was "running an incredible amount of different sort of shows, education, children's, dramas, light entertainment, news, gardening, women's programs, women's world, *Panorama*, religious, *People* programs, interviewing people live in the studio" (Donnellan, 2006).

Originally from Epping in Sydney, Manefield studied to be an entomologist, received a university medal and, as a young biologist, was a member of a 1948 Antarctic scientific team. However, Manefield describes himself as being "the only entomologist in the world who loathed insects" (Manefield, 2006). Despite disapproval from his father, Manefield made a radical career change at the age of thirty and began working in television. Following a very brief time working at Channel 7, Manefield contacted Jim Hall at the ABC Gore Hill studios and was invited to meet Talbot Duckmanton, the then administrative head of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Following this meeting, Manefield began his filmmaking career as a floor manager-in-training in March 1957 and, as he explained, "It was before it [the ABC] went to air, they were recruiting to train me as a producer,...they put me in as a floor manager to just know the way studios worked.... I was making programs at the ABC from the time they started; I'd be considered one of the original producers" (Manefield, 2006). Like most starting in the industry, Manefield was keen to begin working as a drama producer; however, the ABC "pushed" him into making documentaries (Manefield, 2006).

INNOVATIONS

The imprint left on these four men through making documentary films at the ABC is evident in their professionalism, their work ethic and dedication to seeking truth and realism in documentary. It is reflected further in their ongoing connection to their experiences working in ABC television. For the most part, their filmmaking approaches were formed through the symbiotic relationship of skills developed because of ABC training schemes and working in a supportive, collaborative, and educative environment. Within this institutional structure, they were able to innovate with techniques and content within budgetary constraints while still addressing controversial issues of the period. A consequence of this symbosis is a lingering sense of belonging to ABC Television, and a feeling of being part of Australian television history in the making.

Adaptation and innovation were the key elements needed by an ABC cameraman in the early years. Butch Calderwood, BBC-trained and a hard taskmaster, taught Steller key lighting for the moving image and dolly usage, as well as instilling in him the importance of taking meticulous care in cleaning cameras and lenses immediately after use. Every night after a shoot he broke the cameras down and cleaned them to keep them in good working order (Steller, 1990). Steller recalls that, when he first started working as a cameraman, the cameras were cumbersome and inhibited movement. As a stills photographer, he found the 16mm cameras frustrating because he was used to getting in between things or lying on the ground to get his shots with his still camera (Steller, 2006). As a remedy, Steller created a kind of blimp, made out of carpet and feltex, and by using a long lens he was able to stand back and film. In the early 1960s, at Steller's suggestion and after some initial reluctance, the ABC began using the new French hand-held camera called the Eclair NPR. The use of this camera, and the kind of handheld techniques it allowed, were perfectly suited to the investigative style of programmes such as *Four Corners,* for the first time the freedom of the camera enabling the cameraman to get close to the action (Steller, 2006).

The immediacy of documentary filmmaking requires readiness, improvisation, and innovation. The hand-held filming of the 1968 documentary *The Soldier* is an example. This story tells of a young Australian man, Guy Holloway who, at twenty, is conscripted to fight in Vietnam. Steller described this documentary as an example of innovation, ingenuity and close collaboration between the director, the cameraman and the sound recordist. The documentary opens with soldiers at Canungra marching in double-quick time. Steller shot their feet by opening the back door of a vehicle and lying on the floor between the front seat and back seat, with his Eclair hanging down at ground level. The sound recordist lay practically on top of him to record the noise of their boots hitting the ground, while the car rolled "down hill so we didn't have to have the engine running" (Steller, 2006). Director John Power got into the vehicle and simultaneously "released the handbrake, rolled, and just gently braked to keep in time with these fellers running down....and that's how I got the shots... these are the things we had to use because we didn't have dollys" (Steller, 2006). Furthermore, Steller shot with two eyes open while his assistant cameraman guided him through scenes by pulling on his belt (Shirley, 1990). Steller explained that a stills photographer uses the cheek and nose to control the camera whereas, with the hand-held 16mm Bell and Howell, a cameraman uses the head and neck to keep it really steady. To achieve pan and tilt shots the neck is not used but the waist is used because it is thickest and stronger (Shirley, 1990). A film cameraman takes a hundred feet of film and shoots hundreds of frames. As a still photographer working at Warragamba Dam, Steller explained, he'd go and photograph an accident, and "had to tell the whole story with one picture, so you had to really think about where you're going to....you won't believe how much that helps you when you are doing camera work" (Steller, 2006).

Improvisation was a feature of ABC television filmmaking. Based on the BBC style of television, ABC television used improvisation particularly in sporting coverage: "We became very, very adventurous in our coverage of sport, we had coverage everywhere" (Donnellan, 2006). In the early days of television, commercial networks bought programs from overseas rather than making them. The ABC television sporting department:

> *had a monopoly on basically all the sport in this country, from Australian rules, to rugby league, to rugby union, to swimming championships, to surfing carnivals, to golf. ABC television was the master of coverage of sport throughout Australia. (Donnellan, 2006).*

Zoom lenses added a new dimension to filmmaking. For example, the new 2–8 inch zoom would do everything that four separate lenses could do, but without needing to be changed, enabling the cameraman "to come out to a wide shot, track, and zoom in" (Donnellan, 2006). One of the cameras in the studio always had a 2 – 8 inch lens and as a result, gave shooting patterns more flexibility and freedom. Later, in the mid 1960s, the smaller hand-held cameras were lighter and easier to handle, as was the dolly. It was easy to push and easy to manoeuvre (Donnellan, 2006). These changes meant that producing programs became much quicker. With technological developments and due to production time constraints, the value and concept of learning on-the-job had even greater emphasis and meaning.

According to Donnellan, everyone working in the studio had specific contributions to the eventual outcome of programs. The team was more important than any individual. For example, the technical producer was responsible for the overall technical quality of the show. There was a lighting person, a sound person, a vision mixer, and a person in control of the camera video unit which enabled light manipulation and picture quality adjustment.

TECHNICAL AND OTHER INNOVATION IN *CHEQUERBOARD* AND *A BIG COUNTRY*

For these four filmmakers, the passion, innovation and experimentation developed over those early years in television and coalesced in the ABC's social documentary program *Chequerboard* and its rural social documentary program *A Big Country*. Some examples of the programs and their making reveal the extent to which directors, producers and cameraman created new forms of the documentary film.

Manefield became *Chequerboard's* producer, Steller its first director and Walton also directed for a time. Donnellan, on the other hand, went on to be a director on the rural social documentary program *A Big Country*, produced at the same time. While in England in the early days of 1965, Manefield found inspiration in the in-depth investigation of people and society achieved by the

BBC *Man Alive* social documentary program. After he returned to Australia and after six months of planning and negotiation, *Chequerboard* started in Australia: "A direct derivative of *Man Alive*" (Manefield, 2006). The idea and concept of the program met a certain amount of resistance from the bureaucrats, particularly from Deputy General Manager Clem Semmler and others who complained that Australians could not talk; they could not communicate. Manefield vehemently disagreed and fought to convince them otherwise. It was not until the first few episodes aired that the bureaucracy was convinced (Manefield, 2006). *Chequerboard* went to air in 1969 and reflected the social and cultural turbulence of changing times in 1960s and 1970s Australia. Moran—whose description of the program as "the toughest, grittiest documentary series made by the ABC in the 1960s and early 1970s" (1989, p.141) was noted earlier—also points out that other documentary programs such as *A Big Country* and *Four Corners* were more "free ranging in subject matter" (Moran, 1989, p. 163). Moreover, the program also had "a particular social flavour" (Moran, 1989, p. 163). Certainly though, the story of the introduction of *Chequerboard* qualifies Moran's thesis that such documentaries spoke with an institutional, uncontested voice.

The sometimes controversial issues and themes covered by *Chequerboard* at times required the filmmakers to create camera techniques and directing approaches that would aid in eliciting insightful answers to tough and difficult questions. One example of this was a particularly controversial topic broached during the making of the first episode of *Chequerboard*, entitled "Gina: They don't even say hello" (1969), produced by Manefield. The episode is about the 16- or 17-year-old blind teenager, Georgina Hinds, and how she copes in everyday life. From a technical point of view, Gina's eyes raised concern at the time over just how to film her. Faced with filming a difficult and visually confronting subject, cameraman Steller devised to film her "practically in profile and in a subtle, what I call a kind of half-tie shot" (Steller, 2006) but this was deemed as unsatisfactory. Next, Steller filmed Gina by "practically putting the lens on her shoulder looking past her right ear, and I thought, 'bugger it'. Her eyes were rolling around, but after a while that's irrelevant; you're listening to what she's saying" (Steller, 2006). Using the zoom to "underline" what Gina was saying, Steller went to within about an inch above the eyebrows and about half an inch below the bottom lip and held it there, in what would be called "the *Chequerboard* close-up" (Steller, 2006). Incisive questioning, coupled with the close-up camera techniques, "was all new and different, we broke completely new ground, and it was a program that rated really very, very well" (Steller, 2006).

Documentary filmmakers face confronting and difficult issues. A particularly harrowing experience for Steller—during filming for a *Four Corners* story on the 1966 Patna, Bihar famine in India—revisited him when he was directing a story on poverty in Australia for *Chequerboard* in 1970. Memories returned during the filming of the episode, "At Londonderry", about extreme poverty

in Australia in 1970. The gulf of difference between poverty in India and even severe Australian poverty was underscored as he remembered an Indian infant girl dying of starvation and the seeming helplessness of those around her. The Indian experience impacted greatly on him, and "it took its toll" (Steller, 2006). Nevertheless, the "At Londonderry" *Chequerboard* episode remains a favourite both for Steller and Manefield: for Steller, because the film showed the families as they lived, with no electricity, dirt floors, and no running water; for Manefield, because the episode was filmed and edited using jump cuts between interviews, "that was apocryphal to filmmakers then" (Steller, 2006; Manefield, 2006).

For Donnellan, working on *A Big Country* episode entitled "36 Wheels" (1975)—which looked into the world of the road-train truck drivers—was a very hard shoot. It was filmed brilliantly by cameraman Preston Clothier, who shot using a 20/1 zoom on a road that was up to four miles straight (Donnellan, 2006). The photography was superb; however, the interviewees (truckies) "were not very good in conversation. You'd ask a question and you'd either get 'Yep!' 'No', 'Dunno'" (Donnellan, 2006). As a result, production problems arose due to the lack of any substantial interviews available for inclusion, and Donnellan faced the possibility of not having a completed episode. On returning to Sydney with wonderful footage of truckies and their trucks in action, Donnellan integrated some of the interviews with shots of them checking their tyres, along with other salvageable footage, whilst a fictional character narrated over these shots. The episode ended up being short by two and half minutes and, as a result, Donnellan called producer/director John Mabey from the rural department unit. Mabey suggested including some music and some of the travelling shots. "[A]nd that's what we did, I got it to exactly 29.30" (Donnellan, 2006). Donnellan cites this as an example of the invaluable collaboration within ABC television. Moreover, he related that one of the best ways of testing a particular approach was to bring in a tea-lady as a gauge (Donnellan, 2006), using her as an example of an uncomplicated audience who could at times help to bring clarity to the discussion of the approach an episode should take. Other producers could also make constructive suggestions in an atmosphere of healthy competition (Donnellan, 2006). "This was the success of *A Big Country,* because "Sparkesie" [John Sparkes, Executive Producer] realised he gave many producers [and] directors opportunities which they never thought they'd ever have....The camaraderie there was absolutely brilliant" (Donnellan, 2006).

CONCLUSION

In those formative years in ABC television between 1956 and 1964, Walton, Steller, Donnellan, and Manefield established themselves as documentary makers who had mastered the skills, innovation and sometimes controversial topics that mark the best examples of the genre. After undergoing filmmaking education through the ABC's television training scheme, they founded the sometimes

radical, critical and hard-hitting documentary traditions that have marked ABC culture and style in general, and ABC documentary culture in particular.

This article has sought to reveal the perspective of four former ABC documentary filmmakers and some of their innovative contributions to television documentary filmmaking. The filmmakers discussed are now all but retired. Some are still involved in academia and independent film production. At the same time, all retain a wealth and depth of knowledge and personal experience of ABC early documentary filmmaking that requires documenting in order that a complete record of the cultural, historical and stylistic development of documentary in Australia be kept.

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