



Birch, Carroll and Coyle and the Regional Picture Palace: a case study

Denis Cryle, Betty Cosgrove and Ray Boyle

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Abstract: This article outlines the regional origins of cinema company Birch, Carroll and Coyle in Queensland with special reference to Rockhampton and the Wintergarden theatre. The emergence of a distinctive regional theatre designed to attract new audiences for Hollywood product, along with live entertainment capacity, were major factors in sustaining the dominance of BCC in regional Queensland for almost half a century.

Key terms: cinema history, regional culture, Queensland, heritage

Introduction

This article outlines the Queensland origins of Birch, Carroll and Coyle as a noted film exhibitor with special reference to Rockhampton and its Wintergarden theatre. The first regional Wintergardens were constructed during 1923-25 at Rockhampton and Ipswich with a seating capacity of 2 000 each. Building continued with the erection of a Townsville Wintergarden, followed by large new premises at Maryborough and Bundaberg in 1927-29. The emergence of a distinctive regional theatre designed to attract new audiences for Hollywood product along with live entertainment capacity were major factors in sustaining the dominance of BCC in regional Queensland for almost half a century. Regional case studies of exhibition venues like the Rockhampton Wintergarden are no less important than analyses of international production as a means of understanding the lasting impact of the global film industry at the local level. Moreover this analysis will argue that the construction of Wintergarden, in the case of Rockhampton, did enhance local cultural activity, most notably in relation to live entertainment.

The Birch, Carroll and Coyle consortium in Queensland

In keeping with its geographical spread along the Queensland coast, the Birch, Carroll and Coyle consortium originated in partnership between George Birch and Edward Carroll prior to World War One. Best known of the BCC consortium is Edward Carroll, who with his brother Dan, had played a significant role as a producer as well as exhibiting silent films in Australia. 'E. J.' was reputed to have staged open-air screenings at the Brisbane Exhibition Grounds as early as 1901. While Australian news and documentary continued to circulate after World War One, feature film and distribution were increasingly dominated by American controlled studios. By the 1920s, Birch Carroll and Coyle joined forces as exhibitors and embarked on a period of regional picture house construction, silent film had come to be dominated by the powerful Hollywood industry. In 1919, before Coyle joined the business, the Birch

and Carroll partnership was advertising itself from Edward Street Brisbane as "picture and theatrical managers and Queensland representatives for Australasian Film Limited and Union Theatres Limited".¹

According to his wife Mary Ann Birch who survived him, George Birch, in conjunction with the British Bioscope Company, pioneered Rockhampton cinema at the Theatre Royal, then in East Street.² Subsequently Birch opened the Earl's Court theatre, situated diagonally opposite the Wintergarden site in Denham Street. Films were first shown at Earl's Court on 24 September 1910. Although modified subsequently, the Earl's Court complex has (up until 2000 when it was closed) maintained a continuous link with cinema and with the Wintergarden through common ownership, staffing and exhibition by the Birch, Carroll and Coyle group over a fifty year period.

Virgil Coyle of Townsville, who became associated with the existing partnership in 1923, did not immediately join the consortium as a full partner. In Brisbane, Birch and Carroll still owned its Elizabeth Street theatre as a separate enterprise, even though BCC was listed in the Queensland Post Office Directory as operating two Queen Street sites as a full consortium.³ The grandeur of its Brisbane Wintergarden theatre which opened on 1 August 1924 was a promise of developments to come and included most of the special design features of its regional successors including American lighting effects, a Dress Circle and provision for live entertainment.

Before his death on 18 August 1917, Birch enclosed what was previously an open-air venue and upgraded Earl's Court as well as purchasing other local venues. During the partnership phase (1911-1923), Birch and Carroll added Earl's Court and the Airdome Theatres at North Rockhampton and Mount Morgan to their Brisbane holdings. The inclusion of Virgil Coyle as a third partner in 1923 added the Townsville Olympia and Theatre Royal, thereby establishing the basis for a state-wide exhibition network with Mary Birch continuing the Rockhampton interest. Although not as sophisticated as the Wintergarden, the Olympia offered a parallel mix of entertainment and anticipated Birch Carroll and Coyle's subsequent policy of running several large venues in the same city. Featuring its own orchestra and billed as the "House of Feature Pictures"⁴, the Olympia placed large ads adjacent to those for Earl's Court ("The Home of the People's Pictures"), in the same manner as the Wintergarden was to do subsequently. Vaudeville acts and entertainment (song and dance, juggling) were also an important part of the Olympia's program. An Olympia Airdome in East Street Mount Morgan was also a substantial investment employing an orchestra of twelve musicians.⁵ While the Mount Morgan theatre continued in use till well after the 1920s (it was destroyed by fire in 1976), the Rockhampton Airdome Theatre was only used by Birch, Carroll and Coyle until the early 1920s when it was supplanted by the more ambitious Wintergarden premises.

The changes of name for its emerging Queensland theatre chain from 'Olympia' (open air venues featuring boxing and working class entertainments) to 'Wintergarden' (enclosed with sophisticated American-based films) was consistent with the upward mobility of cinema audiences. Mary Birch who retained a personal interest in the development of local cinema after her husband's death confirmed this trend in her Earl's Court opening address of 1939:

¹ Queensland Post Office Directory, Brisbane 1919-20, p. 505

² M. A. Birch, Earl's Court's Opening Address, 19 July 1939

³ *Q.P.D.*, 1925-26, p. 1223

⁴ Advertisement, *Morning Bulletin*, 18 August 1917, p.2

⁵ Nessie Chardon and F.L. Golding, *Centenary of the town of Mount Morgan 1882-1982*, Mount Morgan, Mount Morgan Historical Society, 1982, p. 43-44

Time still marching on with its public taste for comfortable theatres, only inspired me to carry on my late husband's wishes – "Give the people of Rockhampton the best possible at Earl's Court" and so, after several years of study and with the advice of my close associations in the Motion Picture Theatre business, together with the Principals here in Rockhampton, it was agreed that a new Earl's Court be built.⁶

It seems equally likely that Mary Birch played a role in planning for, if not designing, a Wintergarden Theatre in Rockhampton after her husband's death. Intermarriage and close family connections were also a feature of the Wintergarden management, several of whom became linked in marriage to the original Birch owners. The Birchs



Wintergarden Theatre Rockhampton c1930s

lived on the Range in Rockhampton on the corner of Queen and James Streets.⁷ Dorothy Birch, the daughter of George and Mary, worked in the Wintergarden office and ran the canteen for Americans during the war.⁸ Dorothy Birch married R. D. (Reg) Foster who was Wintergarden treasurer to T. A. Garrick in the 1930s and later manager. At the opening of the new Earl's Court in 1939, F. W. Hicklin, the local director, represented the local Wintergarden *The* management while W. J. Winterflood represented BCC as a director and general manager. Members of the Winterflood family were also employed at the Wintergarden at that time, C. R. Winterflood as Head Male Attendant and John Winterflood as office messenger boy. In this way, family connections played their part in consolidating management ties and providing the company with key information on local operations.



Earls Court Cinema Rockhampton circa 1940s

That the new Rockhampton Wintergarden theatre was part of a wider Queensland strategy is confirmed by its architectural similarities to the Ipswich cinema of the same name. Surviving plans of the Ipswich design by architect Henry White published in September 1924 confirm that the dimensions and design of the Rockhampton and Ipswich theatres were all but identical. At a cost of £20 000, each theatre remained modest when compared to White's elaborate metropolitan designs, nevertheless they were unprecedented with electrically-lit Wintergarden signs dominating the skyline. About the same year as the Ipswich development on the corner of East and South streets, work began on the Rockhampton site in Alma Street adjacent to Earl's Court. Although architectural and building expertise were introduced from Brisbane and southern capitals, local contractors were employed as part of BCC's consistent attempt to promote itself as good Australians and Queenslanders.

⁶ M. Birch, Earl's Court Opening Address

⁷ Communication, Ethel Williams to Betty Cosgrove, December 1999

⁸ Interview with Kevin Harris, 25 August 1999

The role of the Rockhampton Wintergarden as a venue for live events as well as for film exhibition was well established from the late 1920s. The new 'Tropical Theatre', the term used in BCC promotions, pioneered sound and the talkies in 1929. When Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* sang not one but "six complete songs" in July 1929, the Wintergarden advertised that:

Last night the Wintergarden Screen came to life! From it poured the golden voices of some of the world's greatest artists – shadow shapes became living beings, singing, talking, playing as naturally as if the actual performers walked the stage.⁹

So popular was the event that special trains were arranged from the coast and from the western line to bring country patrons to town. At the same time, management announced the introduction of more women employees as part of its sophisticated new image – "lady attendants, as well as cashiers, usherettes and cloak attendants".¹⁰ These attendants mirrored the service ethos of the capital city cinemas and were equally a feature of the large new regional theatres. Such formality was possible in an era when cinema-goers were treated to more sustained viewing than in recent times. Screenings at the Wintergarden lasted three and a half hours starting at 7:00 or 7:15 pm and stopping at 10:40 pm sharp to allow patrons to catch waiting buses. In the course of the evening, they were treated to not one, but two features, interspersed with cartoons, shorts and trailers before or after interval.

The Tropical Theatre concept

The main objective of Birch Carroll and Coyle in constructing its imposing tropical theatres along the Queensland coast during the 1920s was to complement existing regional outlets and provide patrons with more substantial and sophisticated venues. There is ample evidence that the Wintergardens assumed a special significance in regional cities like Rockhampton. The Rockhampton theatre is of heritage interest because it is the best preserved and last unmodified structure of its kind remaining. As a brief Heritage and Environment description notes: "It is the only original Wintergarden Theatre from the Birch, Carroll and Coyle chain of seven such signature theatres in Queensland, to survive relatively intact".¹¹ Other Wintergarden theatres have since been demolished or adapted for commercial and other purposes. The heritage value of the surviving Rockhampton site lies as much in the existing equipment and systems as its impressive architecture. Again the model was its capital city precedent erected a year earlier. The Brisbane Wintergarden, with 10 000 light points, promoted itself as having "the greatest lighting scheme ever".¹²

The chain of Wintergarden theatres, though not identical, retained common features in keeping with the Tropical Theatre concept. While Rockhampton and Ipswich appear to have been planned as twin theatres, they retained many features of the grandiose Brisbane Wintergarden including chandeliers and a dress circle. The Rockhampton theatre, for example, featured an elaborate stage setting modelled on the Brisbane theatre: "The setting consists of a false proscenium. A silk poplin act drop, which, though of a plain biscuit colour in itself becomes a beautiful feature

⁹ *Evening News*, 23 July 1929, p.13

¹⁰ *Evening News*, 20 July 1929, p.12

¹¹ Wintergarden entry, QHE

¹² *Brisbane Courier*, 30 July 1924, p. 3

when illuminated electrically".¹³ The Bundaberg theatre, built subsequently, appears equally ornate, incorporating metropolitan features. The Tropical Theatre concept contributed a blend of imported architectural and theatrical features combined with local and practical ones. An example of the latter, were the slatted timber seats instead of the standard red plush variety which allowed the circulation of air in the hotter summer months. Once again this followed the Brisbane Wintergarden which featured open sides and steel roller shutters to accommodate the Queensland climate. The high dome ceilings were also an important contribution at a time when air-conditioning was yet to be developed for substantial buildings. During heavy downpours, blinds could be rolled down quickly to prevent discomfort to the audience.¹⁴

Why did Birch Carroll and Coyle undertake to upgrade its Queensland theatre network on such a scale? As Mary Birch explained:

With the growing popularity of Pictures, it was Mr Birch's wish to give the best possible and always keep abreast of the times which saw fast moving and informed production of pictures and projection machinery. This also brought about a general improvement of the theatre.¹⁵

According to this view, the changing technology of film brought with it new developments in theatrical design and construction. Certainly the Wintergardens emphasised technology as much as comfort, with cutting-edge lighting effects and heavy investment in the new sound equipment. In reality, as Diane Collins notes, BCC were also under pressure in an era of mass entertainment to build larger theatres in Australia with a view to increasing their profits.¹⁶

To offset Americanisation and the dominance of the Hollywood majors, BCC's Queensland theatres featured local flora both inside and out. The ceiling of the Brisbane theatre featured designs of Queensland ferns and plants. Tropical palm groves were featured internally on both sides of the Rockhampton and Ipswich theatres and remained integral to the Tropical theatre concept. When the Rockhampton theatre opened its doors in January 1925 with a screening of *The Thief of Bagdad*, starring Douglas Fairbanks, the local press confirmed its imminent success:

The building erected in Alma Street takes rank as an architectural monument of magnitude. Its bold exterior already excited general admiration. The interior with its ultra modern decoration and seating accommodation will make a memorable impression...

concluding that:

Architectural forms never before attempted here have been blended with a decorative scheme in keeping with the beauty of the theatre and a musical and lighting equipment have been enlisted to produce the perfect palace of living pictures. Slowly will dawn to the observer the exquisite concept of the designers – a picture playhouse where music, form and colour in infinite variety conspire in a complete captivation of the senses.¹⁷

¹³ *Morning Bulletin* extract, 6 January 1925

¹⁴ Interview with Mick Cunningham, ABC, n.d. (Central Queensland Collection)

¹⁵ M. Birch, Earl's Court Opening Address

¹⁶ Diane Collins, *Hollywood Down Under, Australia at the Movies: 1896 to the Present Day*, North Ryde, Angus and Robertson, 1987, p.116

¹⁷ Extract, *Morning Bulletin*, 12 January 1925, n.p.

Distribution and exhibition: Brisbane and Hollywood

This analysis confirms the central place of the Wintergarden and the Birch Carroll and Coyle theatres in the history of Rockhampton cinema and entertainment. The Wintergarden and Earl's Court's pre-eminence in local entertainment was due not only to the quality and size of these theatres but equally to the complex arrangements which prevailed in relation to film distribution over the period of their operation. The remainder of the article, using Julie James Bailey's¹⁸ valuable survey of Queensland theatres as a starting point, explores these distribution and exhibition arrangements, casting light on the business relationship between regional BCC theatres and their Brisbane office as well the control exercised on the industry by Hollywood suppliers. Bailey, in her study of Queensland country cinema, documents the complex set of distribution arrangements in which regional venues like the Wintergarden were involved.¹⁹ Using Brisbane as their point of entry, American studios supplied a limited number of film prints to each Australian state – four in the case of Queensland – and stipulated the itinerary for each state. In some cases, prints continued on the country exhibition circuit for as long as two years. After films had been screened in Rockhampton, they were sent on by train to centres like Mackay and freight costs were paid by the last local exhibitor. If film was damaged, it was returned to Brisbane which would request an investigation. Damaged film could sometimes be repaired by splicing but this also had to be reported.

Distribution, screening and commercial arrangements appear to have been highly centralised at the AMP building, Edward and Queen Streets in Brisbane, where Birch, Carroll and Coyle worked closely with American suppliers like MGM and Fox. In addition to doing all the show bookings for its regional theatres, BCC bulk bought its films and sent out film hire sheets to regional theatres. According to Roy Hobler, a local cinema manager of the 1950s and 1960s:

At no stage were the four theatres, Wintergarden, Earl's Court, Liberty and Tivoli autonomous in the late 1950s; they were controlled through BCC Brisbane, or actually only two men had complete control of films that came to Rockhampton and in fact to their theatres in Queensland. These were the 'film booker' and his assistant.²⁰

In coordinating distribution and exhibition Queensland wide, Birch Carroll and Coyle's Brisbane office incurred some of the resentment directed at the American suppliers who negotiated block contracts of films, often unseen, and increased pressure on exhibitors by demanding 60% - 75% of door takings. While the Wintergarden and Earl's Court at Rockhampton appear to have been closely monitored from Brisbane, American companies also hired local auditors to check on regional theatres. Some of these were less particular than BCC. In one instance, a bank teller was placated with explanation for the low takings:

¹⁸ Julie James Bailey, "Independent Film Exhibition: Country Queensland from the 1930s to the 1960s", *Media International Australia*, 85, November 1997, pp.110-115

¹⁹ Julie James Bailey, "Independent Film Exhibition: Country Queensland from the 1930s to the 1960s", pp. 111-113

²⁰ Interview, Betty Cosgrove with Roy Hobler, 7 September 1999

It was the rain, or a counter attraction on in town. Some films weren't worth a percent, they weren't worth the high or standard price of the movie – of course BCC didn't worry, they paid a percentage on everything.²¹

The larger profitable theatres like the Wintergarden or Earl's Court were less likely to evade their contractual arrangements than their smaller rivals; but BCC took no chances, increasing its scrutiny after World War Two when figures were rung through every night to a receiving machine in Brisbane.²²

Although the Brisbane office organised most of the screen advertising for BCC regional theatres, local managers negotiated some local contracts and organised promotions through a variety of avenues including print and radio. Usually these were used to advertise or dramatise particular films and events. Under the direction of the Wintergarden manager, local promotions were conducted, including street advertising and theatre decoration, until the 1950s. Competitions and contests were also organised in conjunction with particular films and themes. The originality and the 'flashiness' of cinema publicity undertaken by locals like Brailey and Hobler preserved the theatricality of outlets like the Wintergarden in keeping with their dual functions as centres for film exhibition and live entertainment.

Concerts and Local Events

The retention of live theatre capacity was a noteworthy feature of the Wintergardens, though puzzling to some writers.²³ While Birch Carroll and Coyle were seeking to attract a middle-class cinema audience, they were also facing considerable competition from other regional and live entertainment outlets. While not used with the same regularity as the screen, the live stage of the Rockhampton Wintergarden was important for special events and show time, attracting both overseas and circuit performers who travelled across the state. Among the live performances held at the theatre was the first Queensland Eisteddfod to be held in Rockhampton. On this occasion, the Wintergarden was the venue for more than six hundred competitors.²⁴ A concert highlight of the early years, on a par with the arrival of the talkies, was the appearance of the acclaimed Anna Pavlova and her European troupe at the theatre in 1929.

In his *Music History of Rockhampton*, Wright confirms the popularity of the Wintergarden as a venue for live entertainment as well as the talkies.²⁵ In 1933, the Rockhampton Musical Union presented the comic opera *Boccaccio* with an orchestra of strings, brass, piano and percussion. Rockhampton even featured a Mouth Organ Band between the wars. Doug Wallace remembered vividly his opportunity to perform live on stage as a young musician:

We were impeccably attired in starched white shirts and black bow ties, black trousers, socks and highly polished shoes... I remember with clarity my first public appearance on stage at the Wintergarden theatre. This was the

²¹ Interview with Roy Hobler, 7 September 1999

²² Interview with Barbara Stiles, 21 August 1999

²³ Simon Brand, *Picture Palaces and Flea-pits: eighty years of Australians at the pictures*, Sydney, Dreamweaver, 1983, p.52

²⁴ Phil Wright, *The Music History of Rockhampton*, Rockhampton, the author p.142

²⁵ Wright, *The Music History of Rockhampton*, pp. 167, 172

occasion of the Anzac Day Concert. Third on stage, I dutifully turned to face the auditorium and in the glare of the footlights

saw, not people, but hundreds and hundreds of bald heads.²⁶

Regular live events oscillated between local talent for Anzac and St Patrick's Day and the more prestigious visiting acts like J. C. Williamson's shows. More prolonged performances were staged during Carnival (Show) Week when country visitors swelled the ranks of local audiences and local screenings were discontinued for up to a week. Apart from the introduction of Australian news material and the Sydney cinesound reels, the Wintergarden and Earl's Court persisted with the American-based comedy romance formula. Nevertheless their facilities did provide some incentive for local talent, though never on the scale of the regional ABC.

During the post-war period, live shows continued as a feature of the Wintergarden. There were visiting overseas acts – the pianist Winifred Atwell and the Vienna Boys Choir – as well as more regular concerts and performances. Of the latter, the Mobil Quests were remembered for their glamour and vocal talent, backed by the Australian Symphony Orchestra. In the final phase of its live entertainment history, the Wintergarden became a young people's venue as well as a family one. In the 1950s, young people went on from the Saturday night films to the School of Arts where they danced to Kevin Doyle's Band, playing a mixture of 60-40, old time and modern dances until midnight. When the sixties began, dance styles changed to the jive and the twist, the Wintergarden was becoming a venue for live rock and roll shows. Management also opened the Blue Room, a jazz and folk lounge converted from the upstairs kiosk in the sixties.²⁷ The Rockhampton-based folk group, the Embers, performed regularly at the Blue Room and around the town.²⁸

By the 1960s, a combination of dances, teen culture and television was eroding cinema attendance and Birch Carroll and Coyle's monopoly on local entertainment. Under the influence of television and new competitors, the Rockhampton cinema scene was reduced in a decade from a large number of smaller suburban and larger city theatres to only two theatres – Earl's Court and Wintergarden. By this time, the local Drive-In too was also under BCC ownership. Most of the smaller film theatres closed in the 1960s, among them – the Liberty, Victory, Embassy, Rex, Tropic, Gem and Imperial. On the afternoon and evening of 29 July 1974, the Wintergarden eventually followed suit and staged its own nostalgic closing-down shows. The film *Sound of Music* was followed by an evening concert, compered by 4RO's Charles Patterson and featuring the Music Union Choir and the Highland Pipe Band. This combination of film and live performance accurately reflected the special place of the theatre in Rockhampton's entertainment history. Remarkably the Rockhampton Wintergarden survived without the transition to duplexes which awaited most of its regional namesakes. Under the new ownership of Les Duthie (1974 – 1999), who purchased it for use as storage space for his nearby Leichhardt Hotel after its closure, the Wintergarden remains the best preserved example of the regional picture palaces and BCC's once illustrious chain of Tropical Theatres.

Images acknowledgement: The photographs in this article were obtained with kind permission from The Rockhampton and District Historical Society.

²⁶ Doug Wallace, "The History of the Rockhampton Mouth Organ Band" in Wright, *The Music History of Rockhampton*, p. 192

²⁷ Communications with Eileen Arnold and Mrs Brian Stewart, April 1999

²⁸ Wright, *The Music History of Rockhampton*, pp. 297, 299

Note on the authors: Denis Cryle lectures at Central Queensland University in the fields of communication and media studies. He has published on Queensland and in the fields of media policy and history. Betty Cosgrove is a postgraduate student in history at Central Queensland University. Ray Boyle holds a masters degree in history from Central Queensland University and is a prominent local historian in the Rockhampton region.
