

# The Sweetest Country?



## Sweet Country (2017) MA

**Starring:**  
**Bryan Brown, Matt Day,**  
**Written by:**  
**Steven McGregor,**  
**David Tranter**

I reviewed Warwick Thornton's first film *Samson and Delilah* in June 2009. *Sweet Country* is his second film as Director and was released in January this year. Warwick is an indigenous man from Alice Springs.

*Sweet Country* is a rough film (particularly in the language aimed at Aboriginal people), though it is also a film of surprising beauty. Among the violence and also vile treatment of the Aboriginal people, there are scenes deliberately and slowly arranged that are reminiscent of Albert Namatjira paintings - the natural beauty of the country is breathtaking. Warwick Thornton has also used ideas from the traditional western to convey this beauty and the story. John Ford films set in Monument Valley come to mind in this Australian western.

The story is set in 1929 and follows the shooting of Harry March, a white settler by an Aboriginal farmhand Sam (played by Hamilton Morris), who then goes on the run with his wife Lizzie (Natassia Gorey-Furber). A small posse is formed to bring Sam back for a trial, but Sam eventually gives himself up to help his pregnant wife and the trial ensues.

The 'sweet country' that Bryan Brown's character Sergeant Fletcher talks about, is the sweet land that he believes is just right for raising cattle

and living a good life, but there is also an irony to the title as the characters question whether it can ever be really a sweet experience for any of them.

I want to quote a section of my review of *Samson and Delilah* as it is evident that *Sweet Country* has central Christian content as well.

"It would appear from this film that Warwick Thornton is also considering how the contemporary Aboriginal experience cannot be understood without reference to Christianity. The cross is a central symbol, from the simple cross in the tin shed chapel in the Aboriginal community to which Delilah takes her Nana to worship in silence, to the placing of a cross in the family home at the end of the film, where Delilah reclaims her place in her country. While no answers are given, the elements of Christian symbolism and consideration of Aboriginal art and dreaming must be related to the influential experience that Warwick Thornton had at Salvado College at the Catholic Monastery in New Norcia (in WA). His mother sent him there as a 13 year old, seemingly to have him straightened out, and he learnt to appreciate the regulated and yet simple lifestyle."

The Christian faith is quite central again, with Sam Neil's character Fred Smith a gentle Christian man who sees the Aboriginal workers on his farm differently from his neighbours. "We're all equal here. We're all equal in the eyes of the Lord." There is a moving scene as they all join hands to give thanks for their food. In another scene, as part of the posse to track Sam (to make sure he comes back

alive), one of the men bemoans that they don't even sing around the campfire. Fred then starts singing 'Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so', much to the amusement of the other men.

The town itself has no church, but that will change as one of the future images shows that what is raised up is not what the viewer is led to expect, but a church.

The clearest religious context is near the end, and while I do not want to give too much away, it is the positioning of the rainbow while hope is questioned that provides the answer. There will always be love and hope if people truly follow God.

The second part of the film concerns the trial. Matt Day is Judge Taylor and in this town, the courtroom is the travelling cinema. The travelling cinema man had been screening *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), a choice that is not incidental to the director's theme. It was intriguing though to see people in the same deck chairs, but now as the courtroom 'audience', perhaps a nod to contemporary reality TV shows?

There is undeniably a focus and comment on the rule of law (from our British heritage) during the trial, and I leave it to the viewer to ponder this aspect.

Thornton closes out his second film with a song, this time a Johnny Cash version of *Peace in the Valley*; yes an irony, though it links well with the final scene that raises the continuing question about the relationship of the people of the land with the contemporary time they are in.

*Peter Bentley*