The Representation of Religion

in Australian Feature Films

of the Silent Period

1900 - 1929

Preface

In the last few years there has been growing interest in examining the representation in Australian cinema of various subjects. The subjects have been diverse and wide-ranging, including Aboriginals, Australian heritage, women, horror, homosexuality and ethnic groups.

One area which has received comparatively little interest is the representation of religion and religious images in films. Over the nine decades of the existence of the Australian film industry there have been about thirty films which have either a central religious character or a major religious component. From the earliest film, *Soldiers of the Cross* to recent films like *The Navigator* (1988) and *Evil Angels* (1989), religion has featured in a significant way. Over two hundred more films contain minor religious references, often of a bizarre nature.[1] Of the thirty or so major 'religious' films, about one third were made during what is termed the silent era.

This essay will survey the depiction or representation of religion and religious images in Australian feature films from the beginnings of the feature film industry (1900) to the end of what is known as the silent era (1929). This survey was undertaken with a much larger work in mind, namely a study of the representation of religion in Australian feature films between 1930 - 1990. Certainly it is a disadvantage that many films of the silent period are simply no longer in existence, but it does provide an opportunity to survey characters, images and themes noted in plot summaries and to raise questions which the larger study will attempt to address.

Introduction

One key aspect of the religion and film debate concerns how films are categorised. Film writer, John May, has stated:

> In the last analysis, a way of reading films from a religious viewpoint that respects the autonomy of cinematic art need never describe a film as specifically "religious" or sectarian, for example, "Christian". Although a word is obviously shorter than a phrase and the tendency to abbreviate appealing, it is more precise to speak of a film's world view as being open to a religious or sectarian interpretation or to appropriation for the faith experience.[2]

May's perspective is helpful in the context of religious studies because it encourages a broad view of the study of religion. But limiting the discussion of a film's world view to "being open to a religious or sectarian interpretation" ignores the intention of film makers to create a film within a defined category. Religious characters and religious images are often related to specific purposes or a particular functions. These purposes and functions provide a dynamic element, which a film maker may be using to present a film as a 'religious' film. To suggest that a film can only be 'open to interpretation' ignores any intention on the part of the film maker to produce a film in a particular category, namely in this case 'religion'.

Religious films have been made since the beginning of the film industry, from the early passions plays and filmed versions of dramatic plays to the grand scale Hollywood biblical epics like *The Robe* and *The Ten Commandments*. Even though most Western religious films up to the 1950s were about Christianity, they were not sectarian in nature or appeal. These films fitted comfortably into the broad category of religious films, films which focussed on general issues of faith and hope. A general concept of God was presented, rather than a specific or even sectarian presentation of Jesus as God.

A more sectarian element was introduced in the 1950s with the development of a separate and specific film industry dedicated to making films which illustrated the evangelical understanding of faith in Jesus Christ. These 'gospel' films used defined statements about the faith experience, which it could be argued did not need interpretation but adherence. These films in particular indicate that there is a need for a specific category of religious film.

In the case of all films with religious themes, events and characters the basic category would be **Religion**. All films in this basic category are capable of 'being open to a religious interpretation', but it is also more than that. It is actually more precise to divide the films into different types of religious film. These types are:

1. Films where religion is a major part of the subject matter and is integral to the whole film.

Rather than being merely 'open to religious interpretation', these films need to be interpreted from a religious perspective. Films in this category include, *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1914), the story of a deceitful clergyman, and *Shadow of the Boomerang* (1960), a worldwide pictures film (Billy Graham's film company), which was a follow-up to the 1959 Graham Australian crusades. They both may have had different purposes; *The Silence of Dean Maitland* was basically an entertainment film and *Shadow of the Boomerang* was designed to proselytise. These films would not have been made if it wasn't for religion.

This category could be further divided into:

a) **secular religious films** - films made primarily for entertainment

b) **devotional and/or proselytising films** - films made by religious groups and presented to religious audiences as devotional aids and to general audiences for the purpose of evangelism.

2. Films which make use of religious themes, characters and incidents purely because religion or religious characters and incidents are conventional or functional elements.

For example, *Winter of Our Dreams* (1981) included a scene involving a funeral for a drug addict from Kings Cross. The minister taking the funeral is wearing robes which display the symbols of the Uniting Church. The film director, John Duigan chose a Uniting Church priest-minister figure because at the time the Wayside Chapel was the most prominent social welfare church in the area. The religious reference fitted neatly into the overall schema.

3. Films which are only 'open to a religious interpretation'.

The *Mad Max* trilogy and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) provide examples of this type. While these films do not pretend to be religious films, they are still open to religious interpretation because of spiritual and mystical elements.

It should be noted that few feature films made in the silent period are available for viewing even if they have survived. A recent survey estimates that only 5% of the total Australian silent film production is in existence today and the availability of these films is further restricted because of copying costs and restrictions.[3] The main reference material for writers about films of the silent period are the actual film plots and summaries provided in various commentaries and film books. Appendix A lists the silent films referred to in this essay and the films actually viewed by the author.

For the purposes of this essay, only feature films will be examined. A feature is usually defined as a film which was created for theatrical release and has a duration of more than 50 minutes.

Chapter One

Religion in Australian Society

While it is not the purpose of this essay to debate the meaning of the words 'religious' or 'religion', it is helpful to note some aspects.

Ian Gillman provides some helpful insights into the meaning of religion in *Many Faiths One Nation*, his guide to the major faiths and denominations in Australia. After noting that "For most of the history of the white settlement in Australia 'religion' has been equated with the sort of belief in a single divine being to be found in Christianity, and, in an admittedly, somewhat different way, in Judaism and Islam", he then goes on to summarise the basing of a judgement of a 1983 High Court decision on a far broader definition or understanding of religion:

> The essentials of such an understanding are that a religion consists of a complex of beliefs and practices which point to a set of values and an understanding of the meaning of existence:
> * both beliefs and practices are expressed through relatedness to what is regarded as an ultimate reality (e.g. God, Humanity etc.);
> * worked out in terms of responsible relationships with that reality and with the cosmos and other living beings;
> * such relationships involve both gifts to and demands upon us, expressed most often through social groups and the wider community.[4]

As Gillman notes, this is a contemporary definition. It takes into account the increasing importance of other faiths and religious groups, rather than restricting the many faiths to the main faith with which most Australians have at least had a nominal contact, Christianity.

This point is especially relevant for the period in question. During the silent film period, religion and Christianity were often equated. Most Australians claimed affiliation with a branch of Christianity and it would be safe to conclude from the evidence showing that there were few adherents of other faiths, that few Australians would have had any contact with the members of other faiths or knowledge of their beliefs.

At the start of the twentieth century the Christian religion dominated the religious statistics in the census returns. In 1901, about 97% of the population identified with some Christian denomination or Christian cause. In 1911 it was about 98%, and in 1921 about 96%. There was a significant decrease in the 1933 census (down to 86%), but this can be partly explained by the use of a different instruction for answering the question.[5]

However, it should be noted, that these statistical records merely indicate nominal affiliation. It does not indicate how many people attended a particular church or claimed actual membership of a particular religion or denomination.

Most churches experienced change in the early part of the twentieth century. The new century ushered in a new parliament, a new identity, new parties and also the emergence and/or consolidation of smaller religious groups and denominations.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, smaller groups entered what had been the semi-established territory of the five largest denominations - Anglicans, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist.

The Salvation Army, which had promoted the early film industry, experienced dramatic growth during its establishment in the 1880s, but in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century it suffered significant numerical decreases in the two most populous states, New South Wales: 1891 - 10 315; 1911 - 7 413 and Victoria: 1891 - 13 512; 1911 - 7799 (Census figures).

In comparison, another new church of the 1880s, the Seventh-day Adventists, experienced rapid growth in NSW toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the first two decades of the twentieth century, from 83 affiliations in the 1891 Census, 1177 in 1901 to 4337 in 1921. This represented an increase of some 5000%, compared to the population which had increased 71%.

Still, for the period 1900 - 1933, the five largest denominations remained the main denominations and the small new Christian groups remained comparatively small. The number of people indicating they were Church of England (Anglican) hovered around the 40% mark, peaking in 1921 at 43.7%.

The Catholic Church record varied between about 23% in 1901 to a percentage in the high teens in 1933. The Methodists and the Presbyterians kept within 2% of each other, usually hovering between 10-11%. The next largest group, the Baptists, recorded a nominal affiliation of 2.4% in 1901 and 1.6% in 1933.

The next two largest groups, the Congregational Church and the Lutheran Church both suffered the largest declines according to census returns. Their percentage share of the population was halved between 1901 and 1933 (each about 2% to 1%).
These census returns provide a picture of the nominal religious base, but it is helpful to look at some overall statistics showing denominational membership and attendance.

Most of the churches in Australia have never had attendance records which compare in any way with their census affiliation. For all of Australia's white history, the Church of England (Anglican) has had the record for the lowest regular (monthly) church attendance (between 5 - 20% of its membership), while for some of the late nineteenth century, the Wesleyan Methodists had the best record (between 70 -90%).

The evidence suggests that church attendance rates have never varied significantly in Australia for most of its European history, with roughly about one-quarter of the population being regular attenders. It is believed that a similar group, between 25-30% of the population attended church on at least a monthly basis in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Of course, church membership and attendance has varied from denomination to denomination and from period to period, but as church attendance numbers fell for some of the older Australian denominations, attendance in some of the other churches, especially some of the newer churches increased, thus maintaining the overall percentage of regular church attenders.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century consolidation of denominationalism also resulted in an intensification of interest in some practical issues, most notably the question of mixed marriage. For most of the period of European settlement, a mixed marriage has meant a marriage between a Catholic and a Protestant (or non-Catholic). It is probably only in the last two decades that the term and many of the practices associated with a mixed marriage have been forgotten.

During the first eight decades of the European settlement of Australia, practical considerations outweighed any proscription on mixed marriage. While Catholic priests and Protestant ministers alike may not have been enthusiastic about the practice, they preferred a marriage to a defacto relationship.

Patrick O'Farrell records that this practice changed abruptly after the decision of the Australian Catholic bishops Synod of May 1869. The Irish Australian bishops had forced the veteran Archbishop Polding to convene a Synod to define some areas of policy for the Australian church, and one of the key issues they wanted to tackle was mixed marriage.[6]

The 1869 Synod decided to ban mixed marriage. This meant that priests could not marry a Catholic and a non-Catholic and Catholics were ordered not to marry non-Catholics.

According to O'Farrell,

> Before the 1860s somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent of marriages which took place in Catholic churches were of mixed religion. Although the 1869 prohibition might have been expected to have some effect on this percentage, this was by no means clear: in 1929 Archbishop Kelly gave a figure of 54 per cent mixed marriages for the Cathedral parish, although this parish was far from typical. What does seem clear is that the 1869 prohibition had little if any effect on the overall prevalence of mixed marriage within and outside the church. The vigour and prevalence of clerical denunciations of mixed marriage down to the 1950s indicates that it was an undiminished problem. Dispensations being difficult to obtain, priest often turned Catholics away, but despite the difficulty applications continued to be made - and approved - in large numbers. It was a situation which suggested, on the one hand, that Catholics were anxious to be married in their own church, but it must also suggest that the refusal to permit mixed marriages, without dispensation, drove many to contract marriages outside the church.[7]

Michael Hogan suggests that while the ban may not have had an immediate impact on the number of mixed marriages, over time the "culture of Catholic hostility towards mixed marriages gradually filtered down from the Irish clergy to the laity. It was to become a more socially divisive issue in the next century."[8]

What prompted the subject to become a more divisive issue was the promulgation of the papal decree *Ne Temere*. This decree issued in 1908, declared that any marriage contracted by a Catholic without the involvement of the church was invalid.
O'Farrell notes that "before the decree mixed marriages (between a Catholic and a non-Catholic), even those before a civil registrar, were accepted by the church as valid (although sternly condemned and prohibited); that is, the parties were conceded to be truly man and wife, before God and the church. Now, with the decree, they were not."[9]
Again, O'Farrell reflects "As to the effect of the decree on mixed marriages, it seems that more were taking place within Catholic churches than ever before. Certainly it appears that there were no less."[10]

The issue was so politically dynamic that the New South Wales, election of March 1922 brought forward a group of militant Protestants determined to (among other things) amend the Marriage Act to make the promulgation of *Ne Temere* illegal. Their attempt eventually failed in the Upper House, as legislators, both Labour and Liberal wrestled with the idea that the laws of God must be upheld against the laws of the state.[11]

The subject of mixed marriage was not only raised in the theatres of Parliament, it was also raised in the cinema by films like *The Church and the Woman* (1917).

While the problem of mixed marriage only affected a certain group with the population, nearly all of Australia was shaken and changed by the most significant event during the silent film era - the First World War. The war provided story material for films and also expanded the technology available for production. It did not however actively promote the cause or practice of religion in film, though many clergy were associated with the war effort, either through chaplaincy work, the delivery of the 'death telegrams' or the organisation of special memorial services and prayer meetings. Of course there was also bitter division among the churches and individuals over issues like conscription. One writer has commented that "Church attendance increased dramatically during the war: in a climate of enduring uncertainty, there was room for unbelief but not for indifference."[12]

It is difficult to determine what attitudes to organised religion were like after the war, although Frank Engel provides anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that "The war and the post-war years saw a significant hardening of attitude against religion."[13] Also, the threat to Sunday observance continued, particularly with the greater availability of the motor car for country trips and long weekends.[14] Mobility threatened the established pattern of church attendance, which had been mostly modelled on a village life.

Film historian, John Tulloch, notes the impact of divorce and family breakdown after World War I and the panic associated with the flu virus. He argues that the religion (which he stereotypes as "the Church") blamed cinema for "every sexual seduction and vicious crime."[15] Between 1914 and 1919 there was also a vocal apocalyptic element within the churches, who tried to convince the wider society that catastrophes like war and plague were signs of the end times.

Another film historian, Diane Collins comments that "the cinema was challenging the pub (and the church) as a focus of community life: it was open to anyone, irrespective of gender, age, religion or any other affiliation - and open more often."[16] This comment illustrates the tension between the public face of religion in Australia and the personal or private practice of religion. Collin's comment reflects the view that the churches have often alienated large sections of the population from any practice of their nominated census faith.

The 1920s also saw a dramatic change in society, with greater opportunities for women, an expansion in consumerism and growth in technology and methods of communication. The most significant change during the first three decades of the twentieth century in religious affiliation was the increase in the number of people who declined to indicate a religious tag, no matter how nominal they may have been.

In 1901, 0.18% of the population indicated that they had 'no religion'. The percentage increased in the 1921 census to 0.38%, but then decreased in 1933 to 0.23%. It appears that the small decrease in 1933 was due to the large increase in the 'no reply' category. The largest single change in the 1933 census was recorded in the 'no reply' category. 1933 was the first year in which it was clearly stated that people did not have a legal obligation to answer the religion question. This had a dramatic effect on answering the question. The number not replying (including those who 'objected to state' because this category was not allowed in 1933), rose from 1.7% (1921) to 12.8% (1933), an increase of 812%. This contrasted with a population increase of only 22% (5 435 734 - 1921 and 6 629 839 in 1933).

What can be concluded from the discussion above is that Christianity was the public religion for most Australians. It can also be argued that during this period, the rites and practices of the Christian religion (as opposed to any other religion), were more easily recognised and identified with by the majority of the Australian population. Going further, it can be reasonably postulated that if film makers wanted to use religious characters and references, they would have been more likely to use ones from the Christian religion, the faith which most Australians had some experience or knowledge of.

Chapter Two

Religion at the Centre

This chapter surveys the key religious films in this period. Religion is certainly not a peripheral element tacked onto to the main story, religion is a major part of the subject matter of the film. These key films are:

Soldiers of the Cross (1900) (and also Heroes of the Cross (1909) and Scottish Covenantors (1909)

For the Term of His Natural Life (1908, 1927)

The Christian (1911)

The Silence of Dean Maitland (1914)

The Church and the Woman (1917)

The Monk and the Woman (1917)

The Man from Kangaroo (1920)

The Reverend Dell's Secret (1924)

Around the Boree Log (1925)

Soldiers of the Cross (1900)

Soldiers of the Cross is sometimes referred to as the first feature film. Though it is included as the first film listed in the standard film reference work, *Australian Film 1900 - 1977*, most film commentators agree that Soldiers did not contain enough filmic material to warrant this honour. *Soldiers of the Cross* was a dramatic lecture, which combined elements of film, stills and illustrations (projected through slides), music and commentary in the form of a lecture or oration. It was produced by a department of the Salvation Army, the Limelight Department, which could be termed today, a multi-media department.[17] Shirley and Adams refer to it as a 'story film'.[18]

Salvation Army work started in Australia in 1880, fifteen years after the movement had begun in England under the leadership of William and Catherine Booth. The Salvation Army is an evangelical and evangelistic mission and welfare based church. It has two main concerns:

1) the conversion of individuals to an evangelical expression of the Christian faith and
2) combating the social and moral problems of the day (though not necessarily the structural reasons behind the problems).

Since it was a new mission based organisation and did not have any of the restrictions which often come with established practice, the Army experimented in the use of new forms of communication technology to present their message of salvation and reform.[19]

Before film, the Army used the medium of magic lanterns, which projected images on glass slides, including optical special effects. These productions were often used with music and lectures or sermons to provide a sense of cohesion and refine the message. One Salvation Army person related that "The magic power of light that can transpose by those instantaneous flashes of light pictures upon the film, and by the brilliance of artificial light reproduce them magnified upon a screen, is the creation of God, and it can only honour Him, and glorify His own handiwork, to utilise this invention for the salvation and blessing of mankind."[20]

The leading person behind the Army's venture into film production was Major Joseph Perry, an Englishman, who joined the army in New Zealand, came to Australia in 1895 and was placed in charge of the Limelight Department in 1892.[21]
Shirley and Adams comment that Perry approached the initial endeavours "with a mixture of evangelical fervour and showbusiness acumen."[22] Between 1896 and 1897, with the encouragement of Commandant Herbert Booth, Perry brought the latest technology into the Limelight Department, namely the cinematograph.

At first the Department only projected films made by other organisations, but Booth and Perry saw a need to expand the range of subjects and also show the work of the Salvation Army, and consequently the Department moved into production themselves.

It should be noted that the Army was not the first organisation to produce a film in Australia. That honour goes to the company of Marius Sestier, a former associate of the Lumiere Brothers, who after arriving in Sydney in August 1896 began to show films from his own collection before capturing the 1896 Melbourne Cup on film and subsequently screening it on November 19, 1896.

It is possible though, that the Army was the first to produce a fiction film in Australia. The first major production, *Our Social Triumphs* (1898) included a three minute dramatic piece about a man in prison for stealing a loaf of bread who receives help from the Salvation Army on his release.[23] The rest of this production consisted of a series of short segmented films showing social welfare work and other Army activities, coupled with lantern slides and music. The department expanded rapidly after this venture to the point where by the turn of the century, the Salvation Army was the main film production house in Australia.

In America, Europe and Australia, the public grew tired of short films pieces depicting famous buildings and city scenes, so film makers became more experimental. In Europe, the *Passion Play of Oberammergau* "Was the longest and most popular of these themes, save for an occasional prize fight. The first Passion was sponsored by a book company, La Bonne Presse, in the summer of 1897. It was shot on a vacant lot in Paris, substituting actors for children at the last minute; it made enough money to transform a religious publishing house overnight into a film production company."[24] It is not surprising that religious groups made films about religious subjects. After all that was their area of interest and Passion plays had already been established as profitable stage ventures as far back as medieval times.

Similarly in Australia, the success of short scenery-based films soon prompted plans for a large epic production, which would establish the Army's reputation and focus people's attention not only on individual salvation, but the work they believed that Christians needed to do in order to save the world.[25] The epic was *Soldiers of the Cross.* It contained two hundred slides and thirteen rolls of film of between one and three minutes each, held together and integrated by music and a lecture by General Herbert Booth.

Christianity was the central factor in *Soldiers of the Cross*, but unlike most of the films referred to in this essay, the this film was not made for the purpose of entertainment, rather the film was meant to inspire devotion and reverence. The production concentrated on the heroic stories of Christian martyrdom, including the deaths of Stephen and Peter, and countless other Christians who would rather face an earthly death than recant their faith or worship a false God. Shirley comments "*Soldiers of the Cross* was an evangelist's compendium of horrors guaranteed to jolt audiences into an awareness of terrible sufferings for the sake of Christianity. On the screen Perry thrilled his viewers with maulings at the Colosseum: there were crucifixions, beheadings, savage hackings and burnings at the stake, burnings in the limepit, and the spectacle of human torches in Nero's garden."[26]

The film segments were as follows:

> Christ enters Jerusalem; The crucifixion; Stoning of Stephen; Burning of the Valerian martyrs; Bishop Calepodius thrown into the Tiber river by a mob; Massacre of Christians in the Catacombs; Gladiators slaughtering Christians in the arena; Perpetua's martyrdom in the arena; Christians burnt in the lime kiln; Martyrdom of Polycarp; Christians fed to lions in the Roman arena; Martyr praying in sealed room, discovered and hacked to death.[27]

The form of Christianity depicted stressed that Christians should have "victorious lives", which promoted an adventurous life, lived fully in service of Christ. It would have been difficult for the Salvation Army not to have produced a drama which promoted sacrificial service. Herbert Booth himself said that the purpose of the production was "to recruit cadets for Christ".[28] *The Age* reported that "As the audience witnessed martyrdom enacted as though grimly real before their eyes, fervent questions were put by the commandant, and, at intervals rousing hymns were sung by the whole gathering."[29]

In 1902, Booth resigned from the Army to become an itinerant evangelist in America, leaving Perry to choose a different direction in film work, which would ultimately leave him without the support that he needed from within the Army hierarchy to continue his work. Perry began to do more general film work, including government contracts. In 1909, under Perry's supervision, the Limelight Department embarked upon the production of two religious films, *Heroes of the Cross* (1909), which was a remake of *Soldiers of the Cross* with additions and *The Scottish Covenantors* (1909), which was not shown in Australia due to the demise of the Limelight Department.[30]

These last two films signalled the end of the entry of the Salvation Army into the world of film. It has not been established why the Army closed down the Department, but it seems it was because film had lost its appeal as a pure light form to be used for God's purpose.[31]

Chris Long and George Ellis (the present Salvation Army Southern Territorial Archivist) comment:

> Others had entered the film field, others less concerned with upholding the altruistic usage of the medium. Permanent cinemas were by that time [1910] being established in most cities, so the Army could no longer exclusively draw the public to its film shows. In 1909 the Australian government inexplicably gave its film production contracts to the foreign firm of Pathe Freres, terminating the profitable documentary commissions the Army had relied upon in earlier years. The members of the Limelight department found jobs in the vigorous new industry of motion picture exhibition, or turned to other Army duties.[32]

It is likely that the end of the Limelight Department was one of the first examples in the twentieth century of the perennial conflict within Christian circles over the extent to which Christians should be involved in the world and in particular worldly activities of the artistic kind. Churches and groups inclined to a conservative form of Christianity have ultimately erred on the side of avoidance, rather than experimentation.

The Christian (1911)

Like many early films, *The Christian* had been a popular stage play. The director, Franklyn Barrett (1874 - 1961), was a leading figure in the silent film era until he was forced out of the film industry by the effects of production combines in the 1920s.[33] *The Christian* is regarded as his first major dramatic work.

The story centred on the topic of clergy passion. The minister in question was John Storm, who became as passionate as his name suggested. His passion was for an actress, appropriately named perhaps Glory Quayle. Storm was an inner-city London missioner dedicated to the task of saving people from the destruction caused by their own wild living. He believed that Glory needed to be saved from the path of acting which a corrupt noble, Lord Robert Ure, had persuaded her to take.

Storm becomes so obsessed with saving her, that Lord Robert tries to have him murdered by arranging to have his mission hall burnt down while Storm was inside. Storm survives the attempt on his life and as a result of this near experience with death goes to Glory's flat "determined to save her soul, by killing her if necessary. Her passionate pleading awakens the love that he has always had for her, and the film closes with them both kneeling before a shrine, promising their lives to each other."[34]

The Christian is filled with religious characters. From the list of credits it appears that another Quayle is already on the right track (Parson Quayle). There is also a Father Enderby, a Brother Paul and a younger Bert Bailey plays the intriguingly named cleric, Archdeacon Wealthy. The theme of salvation is particularly prominent, though the need for salvation is linked with what was perceived as a socially undesirable activity. In this period, established social conventions were equated with proper Christian behaviour. These conventions excluded those sides of life often associated with immorality, like life on the stage.

The Silence of Dean Maitland (1914)

Like *The Christian*, *The Silence of Dean Maitland* proved to be a popular film version of an established play. The advertisements for the film reported that "the keen interest taken in the picture demonstrated that the drama still lived in the memory of many people".[35]

The film consolidated the reputation of director Raymond Longford (1878 - 1959). Longford was one of Australia's most prolific directors. He had been a stage actor before turning to film. It is now established that his partner and leading Australian film star, Lottie Lyell (1890 - 1925) had a significant impact on Longford's career. She worked with Longford in all of his major films, contributing to the writing, direction, production and editing, as well as acting. After her early death, Longford's creativity declined and by the late 1930s he had left the film industry.[36]

The story revolves around death and deceit. As a Deacon, Maitland has an affair with a younger woman. The father of the woman confronts him and is killed in the ensuing fracas. Because of his secrecy and lies, Maitland is not arrested, but instead his best friend is charged and subsequently sentenced to 20 years for the murder. By the time his friend is released, Maitland is a Dean and an eminent and respected citizen. His friend eventually arrives at the church and Maitland is so overcome by his appearance that in the pulpit, he suddenly and publicly confesses his guilt and then promptly drops dead.

There was a greater emphasis on theatrical involvement in this silent film than was usually the case. A choir of fifty children performed in the actual theatre and an actor spoke Maitland's last words in synchronisation with his lips.

> 'The three darkest blots upon the soul of man - **IMPURITY, BLOODSHED, TREACHERY** - have stained my soul ... I declare before God and man, I repent.'

Sin and guilt were the main themes in this film. It seemed to focus on the problem of sin in the Church, but it was really the church context which provided the base to contrast the sinful activities. Who was popularly believed to be more above sin than a clergyman? Who was less likely to have committed such stereotyped serious sins like fornication and murder? This film provided a great moral tale of entertainment. It demonstrated that even the outwardly holy can be inwardly unholy and argued by example that sin always produces guilt which even the passing of time cannot remove. The film dramatically illustrates a common Christian understanding of forgiveness, namely that only confession and repentance can remove the guilt of sin. It also seems to imply that judgement always catches up with the sinner. After his confession, Dean Maitland does not embrace the 'sinned against', but falls dead - as if struck down like the biblical characters Ananias and Sapphira.[37]

The Church and the Woman (1917)

This film was another Longford and Lyell effort. The story revolved around the subject of mixed marriages, perhaps now a rather quaint term for a marriage between a Catholic and a Protestant. The Sacred Heart Church at Darlinghurst was used for location shots as well as Riverview College, Sydney. Pike and Cooper also note that the scene depicting a Catholic mass was directed by a deputy, Pat McGrath, instead of Longford, a [nominal] Protestant.[38]

Lottie Lyell played Eileen Shannon and Boyd Irwin played Sidney Burton, a medical doctor and Protestant.
Eileen's father refuses to consent to their marriage and unfortunately is soon found murdered, the obvious suspect being Dr Burton. To add a twist, the real murderer makes a solemn confession of the crime to Eileen's brother, a priest. The brother believes that he is bound by the confessional bond, so in order to save Burton he confesses to the murder. Dr Burton is released and Eileen's brother takes his place on the gallows. However, just before her brother is hanged, the real murderer confesses and the brother is saved as well.

The action of the priest in taking on the punishment due to another person has theological significance. One Christian understanding of the atonement places Christ in the same position. This view argues that though Christ was innocent, he gave up his own life so that the guilty (all the people in the world) could be given an opportunity to receive forgiveness. The priest's action to save Burton echoes the words of Jesus as recorded in the *Gospel of John*: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends".[39]
Though this theological dimension touches the surface of the film, another religious issue is at the core, namely the subject of mixed marriage.

It is important to note that the female character is the Catholic. O'Farrell remarks that it was the assumption "and statistics support this - that Catholic women were much more likely to contract mixed marriages than Catholic men."[40] As noted in the chapter on 'Religion in Australian Society', the subject of mixed marriage was both political and topical. The topical reference of the film was highlighted by the closing sequence in which Eileen and Burton are married, but behind the altar (in a Roman Catholic Church). One of the practical effects of the hardening of attitudes toward mixed marriages in the early twentieth century was the introduction of restrictions on the ceremony if it was performed in a Catholic church. The film illustrates this aspect. Being married behind the altar and the use of other positions (beside the altar, or perhaps in the vestry), reinforced the commonly perceived position of the Catholic church at the time of the wedding. Though there was widespread differences in the practical application of the restrictions, it is reasonable to assume that the marriage in this film was linked to the popular views and debate about mixed marriage during the early twentieth century.

Unfortunately there does not seem to be any detailed written reactions from any churches to the film, though one writer has stated that the film promoted controversy, so much so that after initial screenings in Sydney and Adelaide in 1918, it was not shown in Melbourne until 1921.[41]

The Monk and the Woman (1917)

In this film version of a play which had received substantial publicity around the Australian circuit, a 'Brother Paul' appears again. George Marlow was the main instigator of this sensationalist style drama, with Franklyn Barrett the director. This film has a similar story to *The Midnight Wedding* (1912).

A beautiful woman, Liane is commanded to marry the evil Prince de Montrale. She flees to the safety of a monastery, where eventually the Prince finds her and has her placed under the care of the novice, Brother Paul, until the wedding can be arranged. Paul decides to stop the forced marriage. He defeats the Prince in a duel and takes his place at the wedding, but just after the exchange of vows is discovered and taken away for execution. Meanwhile, the Prince has staged a revolt against the King and Paul provides much needed assistance to defeat the rebellion. Paul receives a pardon and, safe in the knowledge that Liane is not in danger any more, he re-enters the monastery to continue his vows.[42]

Stewart states that Marlow was not a film maker, but "merely used films as a means of presenting his plays to an audience far wider than his stage company could do."[43] According to Pike and Cooper, Marlow promoted the film through controversy. "Marlow had already experienced the force of church protests when he first performed the play in Sydney in December 1912, and it was certainly not without some hope of inflaming a similar controversy that he invited church leaders to a preview and asked them to report on the film... The [Catholic] Federation's long report on the film was 'leaked' by Marlow to the daily press, always eager for sensation and scandal."[44]

The two main points of criticism were:

* having the monk take the marriage vows in defiance of his vows of celibacy.
* the general depiction of the monks in the monastery, including scenes showing gluttony and the wearing of weird crosses and fashions.

This film has links with the early silent period in America and Europe, which witnessed the production of many films which portrayed "jolly monks and boisterous devils making merry in peek-a-boo eroticism and drinking scenes meant to be scandalous. Robert W. Paul made *The Monks* in 1898 for the peep-show market in penny arcades. The paper prints in the Library of Congress show a collection of Biograph "monk" films (*The Jolly Monks of Malabar, The Simple Life, and Wine, Women and Song*), made in 1906, which were obviously designed for an appreciative audience."[45]

The Man from Kangaroo (1920)

This film provides a strong contrast to the common image of a country parson. Snowy Baker played the role of John Harland, a country parson, who had been a boxer. At the start of the film, Harland faces ostracism from his congregation because he had been teaching the children how to box. John Harland's boxing may have provided some controversy for his parishioners, but there has always been a debate within Christian circles about the validity of using force for what the Church perceives as a good cause. Anyway, he is transfered to the city where he helps to apprehend two thieves and is rewarded with a posting back to the country. Here however he has to deal with a gang of brutal thugs led by Red Jack Braggan. Things go against John Harland until Red Jack stoops to kidnapping his sweetheart, Muriel (who also happened to turn up in the same area as John). John Harland doesn't even think of turning the other cheek after this and soon Muriel is safe in the arms of the pugilist parson.[46]

Reg L. 'Snowy' Baker (1884 - 1953) had snow white hair, was a "world-class all-round athlete; he ran fitness classes in Sydney, became an entrepreneur (especially in the field of boxing) and eventually a film star. His films were all action adventures giving Baker ample opportunity to demonstrate his incredible stunting prowess."[47] Furthermore, advertisements for *The Man From Kangaroo* did not refer to Harland's character at all. They promoted the "Australianness" of the story and told how Baker's ability meant that he could perform better action stunts than those in "overseas movies".[48] In real life, Baker had been a finalist in the middle-weight boxing title at the 1908 London Olympic Games, so he was sure to make a fight look realistic on the screen. He actually broke his nose during the filming, not from boxing, but because the horse he was buckjumping ran into a tree.[49]

It is interesting that Snowy Baker chose a parson for this character, but then the parson provided a very clear contrast to the other 'baddies'. The hero not only wore white (hair and clerical collar), but had the moral force of God on his side. The villain, **Red** Jack Braggan (red being a symbol for the devil) did not have a chance. Harland could be likened to the Old Testament prophets who often welded the word of God with physical power. He is also in line with the apocalyptic character from the American western tradition, which has been so successfully brought to screen by Clint Eastwood in films like *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and *Pale Rider*.[50]

The Reverend Dell's Secret (1924)

In this film, the Reverend Dell played by P.J. Ramster is a "zealous missioner in the city under-world". He comes across a young girl who is being forced to dance in a 'sleazy cabaret'. The film poster proclaimed that this film was "Greater than *The Silence of Dean Maitland*" and luridly stated that "Into the gaze of the noisesome, drinking throng in this underworld dive he had seen this girl forced to reveal herself in scanty costume."[51]

Dell challenges the man who is doing this evil and fights to defend her, becoming blinded in the process. She escapes the sleazy dance and goes on to star as a ballerina (a dancing image of purity?). Reverend Dell knows that he has been the one who helped her on the journey.

Like *The Christian*, this film equates the proper practice of Christianity with avoidance of what was then viewed as a socially undesirable activity, namely cabaret dancing.
Like John Harland, he is prepared to use force to promote righteousness. Perhaps ironically, he is blinded. Reverend Dell will never again be able to witness the sins of the under-world, but then it may be that this is way he is to be protected from the sins of the world. Blindness is a major theme in the New Testament. Often the aspect of physical healing is highlighted, but spiritual blindness is also depicted. Reverend Dell may have been physically blinded, but he is still able to 'see' the transformation of the young girl into a ballerina. His spiritual attitude enables him to see that which those who are spiritually blinded cannot.

Around the Boree Log (1925)

In this film, a semi-documentary, some of the poems of John O'Brien, the non-de plume of Father Patrick Joseph Hartigan, are presented in pictorial form. It has been variously described as a 'sentimental journey' through the bush society of Australia of the 1870s to 'Catholic propaganda'.
People are given an opportunity to "walk out into God's fresh air and under his blue sky and to drink in the beauty and harmony ..."[52] Peter Malone comments that "The film, made in Goulburn, dramatised the poems in silent tableaux with verse captions highlighting the traditions of the Irish Catholic family and the priest, climaxing with the contrast between the old bush schools and the Goulburn colleges of the '20s and the parish church with the city churches and cathedrals."[53]

As the priest reads the poetry, he recalls these aspects of Catholic life, including the Catholic bush school as noted above; children preparing for a visit from the Bishop and a wedding. The film's climax presents the view that though a priest's life may have changed and though there may be modern Catholic schools, and great church buildings, the Catholic faith is still the same great faith yesterday as today.

The first edition of *Around the Boree Log* was printed in 1921. After the film, an illustrated edition, containing eight "scenes from the Bush for the picture produced by Philip K. Walsh" was released, an early example of marketing. The name for the wood was "the Aboriginal name for the Weeping Myall - the best firewood in Australia except Gidgee." [54]

The first photo shows the priest at his desk, pen in hand, seemingly looking for inspiration. The large window catches the Australian hills basking in the sun. The scene is appropriately titled 'The bush in the sunshine calling me'.
The second illustration 'The little Irish mother' shows a family of excellent proportions (4 girls and 4 boys) gathered together in their bush home, kneeling in various positions of prayer, presumably being lead in prayer by the mother as she prays through the rosary. (The rosary beads can just be detected in her hands). The photo links in with the poem:

'The Trimmin's on the Rosary'.

> I can see that little mother still and hear her as she pleads,
> "Now it's getting on to bed-time; all you childer get your beads."
> There were no steel-bound conventions in that old slab dwelling free;
> Only this - each night she lined us up to say the Rosary.
> However, I am still not sure what to make of the rather wry expression on the father's face. He seems to be the only one not adopting a pious attitude. It may be that he is "himself", the only one she'd pardon, because
> He was hopeless, and 'twas sinful what excuses he'd invent,
> So she let him have his fingers, and he cracked them as he went,
> And, bedad, he wasn't certain if he'd counted five or ten,
> Yet he'd face the crisis bravely, and would start around again;
> But she tallied all the decades, and she'd block him on the spot,
> With a "Glory, Daddah, Glory!" and he'd "Glory" like a shot.[55]

The fifth illustration shows a wedding scene. The couple, some members of the family and the priest are gathered just outside the entrance of the church waiting to have their photo taken. It is captioned "In wreath and veil ... upon her husband's arm." It is an intriguing pose, because while the bride may have taken her husband's arm, her mother has taken a firm grip on her daughter's other arm. The other photos all illustrate an aspect of the bush and the people of the bush.

The poems in *Around the Boree Log* give the film a framework of sentimentality. They recount the wonder and simple pleasures of bush life in Australia from a Catholic perspective. The Catholic faith is depicted as a natural part of the environment of the life of the people, perhaps a contrast to what we do know of church attendance around this period. Many Catholics did not attend mass regularly and 'mixed marriages' made family involvement with the saying of the rosary difficult. Hugh Jackson comments:

> In the country all members of the family were more likely to be present for the rosary, if only because there was less to draw them off than in the city. ...[but], It would be unwise to assume that country Catholic mothers were all like the mother of the poem adding her prayers to the rosary. ... O'Brien, in real life Father P.J. Hartigan, may have been drawing on memories of his own childhood in the 1880s as much as what he observed in his parish, and Hartigan's family were especially devout. Of the nine children, two became priests and four entered Mercy convents.[56]

It is worth noting that *Around the Boree Log* was screened as a double bill. The other film was a biblical epic, *After Six Days*, which featured stories from the Old Testament.[57] This may have been included in order to present an image to the public that *Around the Boree Log* was not just a film for Catholics, but for all interested in the general Christian faith.

For the Term of His Natural Life (1927)

The story was well known. The first film was made in 1908, (same title), the second in 1911 (as *The life of Rufus Dawes*), and the third in 1927, with American Norman Dawn as the principal director. The 1927 film was an extraordinary feat of production for the Australian silent film period. The 1927 version is one of the few silent films with a significant religious component and because it is still (mostly) in existence, detailed reference will only be made to the 1927 film.

The story features two clergymen, both of whom have significant parts to play in the twisted saga of the life of Rufus Dawes, who takes the blame for a murder and is sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land. Reverend Meekin is played by Compton Coutts and Reverend North is played by Mayne Lynton. George Fisher played the dual roles of Rufus Dawes and John Rex.

The film opens with Richard Devine meeting his mother Lady Devine after a long absence. He learns that he is not really the son of Lord Devine, but of Lord Bellasis. After meeting Lord Devine coming back from somewhere in a foul temper, (Devine now wants nothing to do with him), Richard fears that Lord Bellasis may have been murdered or at least in danger. He goes in search of Lord Bellasis, only to discover his body. However, Lord Bellasis has been killed, not by Lord Devine, but by Bellasis's other son, John Rex, a double for Richard Devine. The film shows us that there had been a 'silent witness' to the murder, namely the Reverend North.

Richard Devine is found with the body of Lord Bellasis and promptly arrested. To avoid embarrassment to his family he gives the name of Rufus Dawes. Though Reverend North knows that Dawes is not guilty, he does not come forward to testify and Dawes is consequently found guilty and sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land. While Dawes begins the term of his natural life, we are shown his mother praying for him (presumably not knowing where he is). Even when he is in solitary confinement on Grummet Rock, the film seems to imply that the prayers of his mother can break down this barrier.

Dawes is really a model prisoner, but few people know it. He is the main help for the wife and daughter of the prison governor, Major Vickers, who are marooned near Macquarie Harbor after convicts take over the ship they were being transported on to the new settlement at Port Arthur. The convict leader who takes over the ship is none other than John Rex, who has been transported to Australia for forgery.

In the film Mrs Vickers becomes sick and dies before they attempt to leave the settlement in a makeshift boat. Her daughter, Sylvia is shown crying over a grave with a wooden cross. Unfortunately the whole disaster is all too much for Sylvia. She develops amnesia. With the help of Dawes, Sylvia and Captain Frere, the former commander of the ship, leave their confinement and eventually reach safety. Once they are in Frere's territory, Dawes is placed in chains. This is done, not only because he was an escaped convict, but because Frere is afraid for his own reputation.

John Rex is eventually caught and Dawes is brought to testify for the crown at the inquiry into the incident. He kisses an open bible, a common practice of assent to telling the truth, but is not given any opportunity to set the record straight. Instead, because of a deal between Frere and Rex's mistress, Sarah, Rex is not convicted of any of the charges and is later

allowed to escape. After the trial, the local clergyman, Reverend Meekin visits him in Hobart Town's Gaol. Meekin has come to provide comfort to Dawes, but the sanctimonious piety displayed by Meekin and his attitude that Dawes needs to become a better convict so outrages Dawes he becomes convinced that his only hope is escape. Dawes smashes his chains, Meekin ends up in the water trough (presumably pushed in by Dawes) and Dawes makes a dash for freedom. He is quickly recaptured and sent to Port Arthur.

At Port Arthur who should he find as the Convict Chaplain, but Reverend North. North's conscience drives him to speak to Dawes, but instead of confessing, he offers him tobacco, which Dawes throws down. North then walks away, still with a bible under his left arm saying, "The man I could have saved". It would have been interesting to find out what salvation North was offering, but the film does not explore this aspect. The novel however, elaborates on North's view of salvation, which is a salvation first grounded on earth. After Dawes has been flogged, North says "I might have saved you from punishment, - saved that poor boy from death. I wanted to save him, God knows!"[58]

This incident illustrates that North seems to have compassion for his fellow beings. He is the only one who stands up to the mistreatment of the convicts. In one scene, Dawes is ordered to flog another convict (in the film it is Cranky Brown); if her refuses he is told he will be flogged in his place. Dawes does some flogging, but drops the whip and calls for heaven to send fire from hell to engulf them all quickly. North tries to stop the flogging and goes to get the doctor, but another convict, the madman Gabbett takes over and before he really gets going Cranky dies, probably more from desire than punishment.

It is interesting to note that in the novel during his own flogging, Dawes "blasphemed his God and his Saviour. With a frightful outpouring of obscenity and blasphemy, he called on the earth to gape and swallow his persecutors, for heaven to open and rain fire upon them, for hell to yawn and engulf them quick."[59] Certainly the appearance of some blasphemies on the screen (in print) would have made the point vividly, but given the society values and self-censorship at the time it is unlikely that this would have even been contemplated.

Cranky Brown's death leaves an impact on the other convicts. Soon after two boys escape and decide to jump to their deaths to join Cranky in heaven. Their last words are "Cranky Brown - tell God we're coming." In the novel, Reverend Meekin doesn't have any sympathy for this action saying that they condemned "their young souls to everlasting fire." The author adds that Meekin said the words "piously".[60] The actions of the boys, who are depicted as martyrs, stands in stark contrast to another group of escaped convicts, who "curse their God" and practice cannibalism.

Meanwhile, Captain Frere and Sylvia move to Norfolk Island, with Frere taking over as the Commandant. Dawes and Reverend North are there as well. After becoming the leader of a group known as the ring (convicts committed to avenging punishment), Dawes is targeted for punishment and eventually his spirit breaks. He ends up in the prison hospital. Meanwhile Reverend North continues to show signs of sexual desire for Sylvia. He records their growing friendship in his diary and in one scene tries to kiss Sylvia. North has also been at work on Dawes' case with Sylvia, reminding her of cases like the 'The Count of Monte Christo', in the hope that her memory will be revived. North eventually tells Dawes that he is going to Sydney to plead his case.

In the cells, Dawes and two other convicts have reached the end of their spirits. They all want to die. One of them asks Dawes, "Do you think there is a heaven". Dawes answers "I know there is a hell." The other man continues "Ay, and a Heaven, Lad. I think I shall go there. You will, for you've been good to me - God bless you, you've been very good to me."
Later, the man later and because Dawes was in the same cell he is condemned to die as well, a judgement which he welcomes.

Meanwhile, North has been so "tormented" by his love for Sylvia that he has been avoiding her, but eventually he arranges for Sylvia to visit Dawes and she tries to have Dawes released. Frere becomes wild at her actions (perhaps also because he has seen the growing closeness of his wife and Reverend North). He is not at all keen on having the man who knows the truth about their confinement escape to tell the outside world, including his wife. North becomes despondent and in the best traditions of stereotyped ministerial responses finds remorse with some brandy. (The novel details much more of North's drinking, portraying him as a "confirmed drunkard"). Anyway, this spirit seems to awaken him again and he goes to visit Dawes and confess the whole truth. North tells Dawes that he had been a gambler in his youth and forged notes which Lord Bellasis had in his possession when he was murdered. North had taken the notes back after seeing Bellasis murdered and then left, just before Dawes (then Devine) had discovered the body. He then asks Dawes and God for forgiveness and also calls on God to grant Sylvia her memory again. As he looks upward (toward heaven?), Dawes replies "God forgive you, Sir".

Now, with a free conscience (this chapter in the novel is entitled 'The Redemption'), North then exchanges clothes with Dawes to allow him to escape and the scene ends with North on his knees praying, looking upward, as if toward heaven.
Meanwhile Frere has become obsessed with Dawes and decides to go the prison, presumably intending to kill him. On entering the prison, he finds that the other convicts have been freed, so he locks himself in a cell, but they break down the bars and Frere is given the same punishment that he has given to other people.

Meanwhile, in England, the double of Dawes (and his half-brother), John Rex has been masquerading as the returned son of Lord Devine, Richard Devine. He has been leading a wild life much to the chagrin of the praying mother. Rex is eventually exposed as an imposter and collapses when he comprehends that he had actually killed Lord Bellasis, his father.

Back on Norfolk Island, Sylvia leaves Frere and boards the same ship that Dawes has managed to join. It is worth noting that in the novel, the story does not end with Dawes returning to England with Sylvia to claim his inheritance, but with their deaths during a cyclone. The 'Good Mr Dawes' is taken to earn his reward elsewhere. The film however turns this idea around completely. The last scene shows Dawes and Sylvia alive on a raft, seemingly the sole survivors of the cyclone, looking toward Norfolk Island and continued earthly salvation. The film allows a happy ending, but it is more than that. Because Dawes has suffered so much he is allowed to start life again, this time in the company of the woman he had sacrificed so much of his life for.

Chapter Three

The use of religion in film

This section surveys all the films of the silent period and notes in particular the films which use religion, particularly religious figures for limited function purposes and specific tasks within the overall drama of the film. The section also refers to some of the key religious films (discussed in the previous chapter), because in these films some specific aspects of the use of religion are highlighted.

In many of these films, the main character types are general religious figures not aligned to any particular group or Christian denomination. These general figures are used for limited dramatic purposes and include people who call on God in time of need, the good Christian, the repentant sinner and the muscular Christian. The main distinguishing feature of these general figures is that they are not usually ordained members of a Christian denomination.

Specific tasks are nearly always undertaken by another type of general religious character. Unlike the general figure used for some limited dramatic purpose, the characters chosen to perform specific tasks are usually associated with an official church. These characters are usually ministers of religion and their specific tasks include presiding at marriage ceremonies, taking funerals and other duties associated with the public image of the Church.

1) The General Religious Figure

Many films use a general religious figure to portray a certain character type. The term 'general' is used to refer to a Christian character which is not attached to any specific denominations. In this period the general religious figure was nearly always a Christian.

Calling on God in Trouble

Occasionally distraught characters appear in films, looking so shaken by some experience that they appear ready to call on anyone for help. Who do people call on for help when they are alone? Usually some form of internal or external power. In *The Women Suffers* (1918), Marjorie Manton (played by Lottie Lyell), is a seduced, left pregnant and caught in a web of social despair. She is led to take a desperate measure - "She goes to the chemist shop and procures some medicine, and kneeling down by the bedside in the moonlight she prays to God in her hour of distress. After her prayers she throws herself on the bed and sobs as if her heart would break." [61] It seems her prayers are answered, because Marjorie is not only saved from her depression, she is also provided with a man, though one is left wondering why it is the man who caused her depression in the first place. Perhaps there is also a theological point here about the nature of forgiveness?

In *The Sentimental Bloke*, both Doreen and the Bloke use God references at emotional moments. At the 'beano', Doreen uses the song 'The Curse of an Aching Heart - The Moral Song with a Blessing' to ask "May God Bless You" - the Bloke. This is the song she uses to capture his soul.
The Bloke seems to call on God when he "falls" from his newly established life of married sobriety. He recognises that he needs forgiveness from his "flamin' sins". Later, after the birth of his son, he says "It was a pray'r ... I thinks uv church, when in that room I goes 'oldin'me breaf an' walkin' on me toes." The "church" the Bloke mentions is not the one with boring old silver haired men sermonising, rather it is the church of mystery and awe. He seems to sense the mystery of life. The Bloke's reaction is like that of the three shepherds who visited the baby Jesus in the manger. The room where Doreen has given birth is portrayed as a similar place, full of holiness and worthy of reverence. It seems that Christian concepts of creation (birth), sacrifice and service are alluded to in these comments of the Bloke.

Even in comedy people turn to God for help. In *The Kid Stakes* (1927), one of the 'lovers', Horatio, half-heartedly offers up a little prayer, before he and the other lover (girlfriend) are put through the 'torture test' by the members of Fatty Finn's gang.

The Hypocrite

The religious hypocrite is a well-known specimen. Today people may think of certain American tele-evangelists as the par excellence of this type. The religious hypocrite provides excellent opportunities for a film director to explore not only religion, but also other topical and potentially sensationalist areas such as sex and power. In particular, the sexual misconduct of clergy is a popular target, one successfully exploited in recent films like *Salvation*. These characters are more likely to be formally linked with a Christian denomination because the status of the denomination (even if the denomination is not defined), as a guardian of public morality highlights even more the individual's inconsistency.

An innocent young clergyman is seduced by a "bad woman" in the provocatively named film *Angel of His Dreams* (1912). Normally angels are depicted as servants of holy activity, but this one plays on the idea of an angel in disguise. This film arose out of a play, the type of which was (as already noted in *The Monk and the Woman*), in the director George Marlow's, "notorious repertoire of sex and scandal."[62] Credit lists reveal that a real angel appears in *The Joan of Arc of Loos* (1916).

One of the most prominent religious characters in the silent period was Dean Maitland. He would be celebrated again in the 1930s in a Ken G. Hall film of the same name. The plot of this film has already been detailed, but it should be noted that *The Silence of Dean Maitland* used an English setting and like *Angel of His Dreams*, reinforced the dramatic plays which contained these themes.

The Reverend Dell's Secret (1924) also combined religion and sex, though in a twist in this film, the clergyman appears virtuous. He is the saviour of a young girl, even at the expense of his own sight. As I have noted, perhaps it was for his own salvation that he was blinded, because it means that he lacks the opportunity to look lustfully on a woman (particularly those 'exotic' dancers in the sleazy cabarets) ever again. Franklyn Barrett also exploits religious references and sexuality in *Know Thy Child* (1921). The film was advertised sensationally as being about a married man settled in his 'Eden' (contended life) when along "comes Eve to cool his affection for his wife ... and Eve was - HIS OWN DAUGHTER!"

Perhaps the most obvious example of the religious hypocrite occurs in *Does the Jazz Lead to Destruction* (1919). Mr Egbert McWowse (is the name too obvious?) decides to indulge in music after all and declares that he doesn't "give a dash what the congregation says."[63]

Cowardice and power feature as prominent themes in *Struck Oil* (1919). Directed by Franklyn Barrett, Percy Walshe plays Deacon Skinner (the term deacon in this case most likely means a non-ordained deacon from a non-episcopal church), who persuades another man to take his place in a war setting (American Civil War) in return for the title deed of a farm. After the war, Skinner tries to cheat the man out of the deed, but eventually all is worked out and Skinner exposed as a cowardly hypocrite.[64]

For the Term of His Natural Life contains two major religious hypocrites; the Reverend Meekin and the Reverend North. Meekin is a hypocrite because he is outwardly pious, (he claims to be a true keeper of the Lord's ways), and yet is without compassion. North is a hypocrite because he does everything a member of the clergy is not supposed to do; he is a drunkard, a luster after women, a gambler, a liar and deceiver. It is interesting to note that the film indicates that North is forgiven because he recognises he is a hypocrite, while Meekin remains unforgiven because he does not even realise that he needs forgiveness.

The 'Good' Christian

Probably the most notable example of this character type is Rufus Dawes in *For the Term of His Natural Life*. Rufus Dawes is "Good Mr Dawes", a true Christian, because of his actions, not his words. He suffers wrongly and terribly for other people, but can still give help to people in need. One of the other convicts actually tells Dawes that he will see him in heaven, because "you've been good to me - God Bless you, you've been very good to me." In the prison context this has overtones of Christ's message to the disciples - for whatever you did to the least of these you have done for me. The boy convicts who commit suicide are also examples of 'good' Christians. They appear as innocent lambs to be martyred and then resurrected.

John Lee appears as one of the most popular 'good' Christian characters. His story made excellent movie fare. John Lee, an Englishman, was sentenced to death in 1885 for murdering his benefactress. Three times they tried to carry out the execution by hanging, but each time the gallows failed to open. His sentence was committed to life imprisonment and after serving several years, the real murderer admitted to the crime and his name was cleared.

His story was filmed in 1912 (as *The Life Story of John Lee*, or *The Man they could not Hang*) and again in 1921 (same title). The second film in particular revolved around the idea of a benevolent and omnipotent God. This type of God provided help for those who remained faithful, even under wrongful arrest. "Piety was heavily stressed: characters often paused for prayer, and the film ended with Lee's small child thanking God for saving her father. Lee himself emerged from jail to pray for those sinners whose perjured evidence had placed him there: 'May those responsible obtain more mercy than they have shown to me.'"[65]

One of the more interesting examples of the good Christian is the Sentimental bloke - the Australian character, with a heart of gold, a doer of the golden rule. John Tulloch comments about the director, Raymond Longford, that "His conception was of the individual pioneer up against the crushing monopolies as David to Goliath, and that opposition between small, individual, human qualities and huge, impersonal forces is deeply imprinted in the structure of *The Sentimental Bloke*."[66] This 'good Christian' is not a conventional worshipper, his religion is that of mateship and humanity.

The Repentant Sinner

The Life and Adventures of John Vane, The Notorious Australian Bushranger (1910) is about John Vane, a member of Ben Hall's gang, who dramatically reformed. He surrendered to a priest, spends fifteen years in prison, expiates his sins and emerges at the end "at peace with the world, a living example of the moral lesson, 'often from evil cometh good'". A reviewer in *The Bulletin* (17 March, 1910) remarked "The whole film is a rare hash of saintliness and sensation."[67]

In *A Ticket in Tatts* (1911), a man repents from his gambling ways and returns to his former life of sobriety and family concerns. This film also lists a clergyman and though it is not known what role he played, it is not unreasonable to presume that he was involved in helping to bring the man back from the life of a major sinner.[68]

Marjorie Manton in *The Woman Suffers* (1918) provides another example of the sinner who receives grace when she asks God for help. Perhaps the Sentimental Bloke is also another example. After confessing his sin (a drunken night on the town and consequent neglect of Doreen), he is rewarded with the birth of a son - "like a prayer".

The Muscular Christian

As I have already noted, *The Man from Kangaroo*, provides a very different portrayal of a clergyman. Snowy Baker was an athlete turned actor (perhaps a 1920s Arnold Schwarzenegger) who wanted to make 'wholesome and clean films'.[69] Various scenes promote Baker as a fighter for Christ and justice. He is perhaps the type of character which some film-makers want to portray to the public as the successful Christian - strong, yet gentle, a man among men. The character of Eric Liddell, in *Chariots of Fire* provides a contemporary example of this type of portrayal, though like Kangaroo, the film does not attempt to present this image for religious reasons. The muscular Christian image arose out of a faithful attempt to portray the person of Eric Liddell as he really was.

2) Religious tasks and duties

The Marrying Clergy

One of the main duties of clergy is the conducting of the legal and religious rite of marriage. In 1901, 96.25% of marriages were conducted by Christian clergy. In 1946, 90.7% of marriages were conducted by religious celebrants.[70] This rate only dramatically decreased in the 1970s, so it is reasonable to assume that if a film in the silent period featured a wedding ceremony, then the conventional setting of church and/or clergy would be used. Judging from the number of Australian films where clergy miraculously appear to marry people, it would seem that a major purpose of cinema clergy is to prevent fornication.

In the silent period a number of films feature a wedding scene including *The Fatal Wedding* (1911), where no less than a Reverend Dr is involved with matrimony, while a common ordinary parson performs a service in *The Bondage of the Bush* (1913). In *The Romantic Story of Margaret Catchpole* (1911), the title character, played by Lottie Lyell, is married happily ever after a traditional melodramatic life which had included transportation and disputes between suitors.[71]

The Midnight Wedding (1912), features two weddings. The first is a secretive wedding in a chapel. The priest recruits a volunteer groom to exchange vows with the beautiful Princess Astrea in order to prevent her from being married to the evil Captain Von Scarsbruck. Her choice was marry him or enter a convent. The second wedding is "a grand and festive occasion", where of course she marries her first husband again.[72]

In *On Our Selection* (1920), David Edelsten plays a parson called to celebrate the wedding of Kate Rudd and Sandy Nelson. (The wedding scene is also included in the 1932 film). The Rudd family continues this tradition with the next film, *Rudd's New Selection* (1921), which opens with Dave's wedding.

Possibly the most well-known silent screen wedding in Australia was that performed in *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919). The Bloke (Bill, played by Arthur Tauchert) marries Doreen (played by Lottie Lyell). The parson is played by Charles Keggan (who played the father of Dean Maitland in *The Silence of Dean Maitland*). The wedding scene follows the verse of *The Songs of A Sentimental Bloke*. It contrasts the formality of the parson with the informality of the Bloke.

The wedding scene starts with the image of a church on one side of the screen and an altar/front scene in the bottom corner. Next, it moves to a close-up of the bridal party, showing their backs and the welcoming face of the minister, who is prominently located in the centre. The Bloke sees the minister as "The queer ole Pilot Cove, Wiv silver 'air an' gentle ways, Dressed in 'is little shirt wiv frills an' bands." It is evident that the Bloke is not a regular attender of church affairs. He is in church only because this is where 'your duty is done'. Indeed, the Bloke knows what he came for - to get married, not to let some fancy dressed "pilot-bloke" prattle on and on. When he is asked the question - Will he take Doreen ...?, his first reaction is "Aw, take a pull!" Of course he will take her. "Wot in the 'ell's 'e think I there for?" After he is settled down by the best man he replies "Will I wot?"

As the Bloke places the ring Doreen's hand, the minister joins their hands and then shuts his book. This is the moment the Bloke was waiting for, it signals the end to the ceremony. As the Bloke and Doreen turn and face the waiting crowd, the minister fades out of the scene, his primary duty completed, though in this wedding scene he still has to perform another duty. At the reception the minister is depicted standing beside the couple, speaking "a little piece" about marriage being like a boat in the sea - it has its ups and downs. He finishes his speech and is suitably applauded. This is the end to all the minister's duties; he has performed the state function of marriage, given some post-marriage counselling and probably even gave thanks to God for the wedding supper.

The Bloke and Doreen soon make their exit and after waving them away, the rest of the guests make their way back to continue the party. The one notable exception is the minister, there is now a vacant spot where he sat. The minister is no longer needed and anyway it is unlikely that the stereotype of the restrained clergyman would have prevented him from continuing to join in the celebrations.

The use of churches should be noted, as they provide a total picture of the religious ceremony for the wedding. In *Jewelled Nights* (1925), Louise Lovely played Elaine Fleetwood, a bride who leaves the groom, a man she really does not love, during the marriage ceremony in a church. Louise Lovely actually had a mock church built for the wedding scene. The building took one month and apparently could fit one thousand people. Andree Wright notes Louise's Hollywood background and comments that this elaborate set stood in "contrast to other Australian productions at the time which would have simply used a real church."[73] Another writer notes that "To be fair to Lovely, however it was more than her adherence to the Hollywood example that encouraged such production extravagance: real churches proved reluctant to house a 'fake' wedding and Lovely did not want the film identified with a particular denomination."[74]

These comments raise interesting questions. What does a 'real church' look like? Do people discriminate between denominational churches in any real way. Many churches, particularly those in an episcopal tradition are built with similar designs. It would be difficult to design a church which did not contain some elements common to several denominations. Louise's church seemed to end up as a cross between an Anglican and a Catholic church.

An interesting example of a very different use of a church was provided in *Yachts and Hearts*, or *The Opium Smugglers* (1918), which was a story about a villain who smuggled and circulated drugs through a cabaret set-up. Special effects were apparently used with great effect because "when warning was given of a police raid, it could be rapidly transformed into a church, much to the confusion of the police."[75]

Ashes to Ashes

Death is a major opportunity in the life of a religious person. Even the people who claim 'no religion', may end up on the receiving end of a member of the clergy. It is perhaps not without some irony to note that for some people the only time they will enter a church is when they are carried into it. Clergy and undertakers seem to go hand in hand.

It is not at all surprising that few Australian films have looked seriously at death and/or people's ideas about what happens after death. The early film makers concentrated on action oriented scenes, which may have included some dying or even martyrdom (as in *Soldiers of the Cross*), but the next stage really didn't fit into an action drama. One area which did receive attention is the granting of last rites or prayers before death.

In *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* (1916), Vera Pearce plays Nurse Cavell, a nurse executed by the German occupying troops in 1915, because it was alleged that she was helping the Belgian resistance. In this film, Harrington Reynolds plays the Reverend Thomas Gerard, a religious comforter.
In another film about the incident, *Nurse Cavell* (1916), stills of the end of the film show Nurse Cavell with a cross in her hands being addressed by a priest/clergy figure. It appears that a blessing is being administered.[76]

Interestingly, the only bringer of relief in *The Sentimental Bloke*, when Doreen's mother dies, is the medical professional. The film does not even hint at any religious significance at all. It could be argued that the film demonstrates that religion is not a source of comfort for ordinary Australians like the bloke. After all the bloke's religion is an earthly affair, not a heavenly one.

Other religious professionals

A prison chaplain appears in *A Coo-ee from Home* (1918). It is a story with a familiar ring. The main character Will Morrison is framed for murder and sentenced to death. He is saved from this earthly fate by the prison chaplain who helps him to escape.[77]
The Tide of Death (1912) contains references to a Roman Catholic religious order. In this film, Sylvia Grey, played by Lottie Lyell, is kidnapped by the Black Dan gang. Her husband leaves Australia believing that she has left him, but Sylvia escapes and seeks refuge in a convent run by the Sisters of Mercy, where she becomes a teacher. Eventually she is reunited with her husband, but not without a considerable amount of time elapsing.[78]

In *The Dinkum Bloke* (1923), the Bloke's wife, Nell dies after an operation, but not before making the Bloke promise to bring their daughter Peggy up as a lady. To this end, the Bloke sells their home and places Peggy in an "expensive convent school". He hopes that she will marry a 'swell', but after leaving the school and meeting one, she determines to go back to the convent. Everything works out for good in the end.[79] In this film convents are symbols of refuge, learning and sacrifice. Stills from *The Dinkum Bloke* depict the religious women clothed in the standard fashion of sisters/nuns of the period, a fashion which symbolised separation from the world.

The Salvation Army makes an appearance in *Sunshine Sally* (1922). The Salvation Army was well-known for its social welfare work, particularly in Sydney after the war, and what better place for a film to record an officer working than in the slums and specifically with the people from Woolloomooloo. A Sallie women, played by Maude Ranier, helps to resurrect Sal, a woman who had been abducted from the upper classes and now mixes with four people from the 'loo'.[80] An earlier film,

The Jackeroo of Coolabong (1920), with Snowy Baker also contained a character with Salvation Army credentials. Edith McDonald was the daughter of the station manager who is described as a 'ministering angel' in the destitute slums of Sydney.[81]

The Bells (1911) and *Environment* (1927) provide good examples of the stereotypical use of a member of another faith group, 'the Jew'. In *The Bells*, the Jewish character is a wealthy Pole, who is consequently murdered for his wealth. The murderer, an Alsatian innkeeper is plagued by guilt, but the murder is never revealed. In *Environment*, Arthur the villain hires his 'evil Jewish friend' to spy on other people. The stereotype of the shifty and money hungry Jew abounds.

3) Films open to a religious interpretation.

While all the films surveyed in this essay are open to a religious interpretation, one film in particular provides an example of films which have a spiritual dimension, rather than overt religious characterisation.

In *The Breaking of the Drought* (1920), Franklyn Barrett, portrays the drought as a "metaphor for that traditional Australian belief in the spiritual drought of the cities".[82] The main character, Jo Galloway has his land repossessed by the bank, so he moves to the city where his son Gilbert is leading a decadent life. Eventually the family is able to be re-united and after they make the pilgrimage back to the country the rain begins to fall, welcoming them and symbolising success for their renewed venture.[83]

Beaumont Smith's film *Satan in Sydney* (1918) deserves to be mentioned, even if it is only for the title, which has been described as "Surely one of the all-time ten best Australian film titles."[84] Smith has been referred to as an exploitation film maker - someone who makes B-grade films which usually have a large degree of action and sensationalism. A more contemporary example would be his namesake Brian Trenchard-Smith. It is still not certain who was Satan, though the film was about a German who opens a gambling and opium den in Sydney in order to distract Australian soldiers from the war effort. There were also numerous references to the Chinese, which caused some controversy, particularly because China was an ally during World War I.[85]

Conclusion

Religion in Film

This essay has attempted to survey some aspects of the representation of religion in Australian films of the silent period. While the survey has not been exhaustive, it is hoped that it has been a starting point for a much larger and more reflective study. With this in mind, it is helpful to note some tentative conclusions.

1) Australian films of this period reflected the domination of institutional Christianity.

As the previous chapter has shown, Christianity, at least in its nominal form was the dominant expression of public religion in Australia. For example, it would have been difficult to portray a wedding without a Christian minister, because as already noted, nearly 100% of weddings during this period were performed with church rites.

The Church and the Woman further illustrates this point, since the context was not only Christianity, but the topical subject of the mixed marriage. Today in a multicultural society a mixed marriage would be more likely to be that of a Christian and a Moslem, rather than two people from the same religion.

It is also worth noting that films in the silent period (and indeed up to the late 1960s) lacked references which have been considered blasphemous - where religious names are used as expletives. It would have been especially difficult in the silent period to use these words because they would have had to have been displayed on the screen in print.

2) The types of religious figures portrayed represent the dominant forms of Christianity in Australia at the time.

Usually the forms of Christianity displayed were those which the majority of the population were associated. The basic categories were: Catholic, Anglican (Church of England) and Protestant.
Of the eleven major films mentioned three were period or historical/biblical dramas produced by the Salvation Army (*Soldiers of the Cross, Heroes of the Cross and Scottish Covenantors*). The Church of England was the base for at least four: *The Christian, The Silence of Dean Maitland, The Reverend Dell's Secret, For the Term of His Natural Life,* (It is possible that *The Man from Kangaroo* was also from the Church of England, but he may be a general Protestant figure) and The Catholic Church featured in three: *The Church and the Woman, The Monk and the Woman, Around the Boree Log.*

The smaller denominations, (except for the Salvation Army, which had overt connections with social welfare activities), did not appear even for the purpose of fun. It appears that Christian sects were not relevant for the public portrayal of religion during this period. One of the early Australian talking films, the Charles and Elsa Chauvel film *In the Wake of the Bounty* (1933) did not even attempt to point out that the residents of Pitcairn where not pious Anglicans, but converts to Seventh-day Adventism.[86]

3) Certain characteristics of early twentieth century Christianity were also prominent in the society.

a) Sectarianism

This period evinced a more pronounced sectarian split than today. The reaction to *Around the Boree Log* provides one example. The distributors had difficulty booking it in some places because of its Catholic base, even when there were testimonies from Protestant ministers endorsing it.[87] Sectarianism was also highlighted in the case of mixed marriage.

b) Male Dominance

Males dominated the public face of the religion, just as they dominated most sections of public life. It appeared natural to portray only males in the clerical roles, because it was a male arena. Few women had any active public role in Australian religious circles during this period. The question of the ordination of women was not even on the agenda for most denominations until the 1960s (though Winifred Kiek was ordained as a minister in the Congregational Church in 1927).

4) Religion in the silent period was mainly used for functional purposes.

a) The performance of religious tasks and duties

Religious characters mostly spent their screen time performing the tasks with which the population associated them. The rites of passage (particularly marriage and funerals), social welfare obligations, evangelism and various forms of ritual worship.
For example, it appeared natural to portray a clergyman officiating in marriage ceremonies on screen, because the overwhelming majority of people had participated in such an occasion, whether personally or as a guest. If a wedding scene was demanded by the script then the wedding professional, the minister of religion was called to perform.

b) To highlight and contrast characters

Religious characters make excellent figures of contrast, especially if a significant contrast is needed. Who better to expose as a hypocrite than a clergyman. The exposure of a clergyman as a sinner like Dean Maitland made sex and religion a successful combination on the screen. Religion also provided a vehicle of change for people who had sinned or had been sinned against. Men like John Vane were able to appear as forgiven human beings, while men like John Lee were able to appear as forgiving human beings. The religious character also provided a contrast with the 'ocker' Australian, especially the larrikin bushranger or the Sentimental Bloke.

The reliance of film makers on stereotyped religious functions tasks meant that the portrayal of religious characters was generally limited. Film makers showed little interest in any wider religious issue, they were more concerned with using religion to facilitate the story line. Even where the films placed religion at the centre of the plot, the religious characters were usually devoid of character and there was little variety in acting and little depth in understanding.

One of the last films to be made in the silent period was called *The Devil's Playground* (1928). (The film bears no relation to the 1976 Fred Schepisi film, in which religion was the integral element). The religious reference in the title of the film was related to the passionate lifestyle of a group of 'wicked whites' on a tropical island. This was not a religious film in any sense, it only appropriated a religious symbol to present an image of sin in the minds of the viewer.
This title was a significant change from the first film, *Soldiers of the Cross*, a religious film which not only had religion at its centre, but attempted to promote religion as a worthwhile cause and an active agent against sin.

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5. For the following statistical references see primarily: Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Data and Walter Phillips, 'Religion', Chapter 25 in *Australians. Historical Statistics,* Vol.10, 1987. ed. W. Vamplev, Sydney, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon. I have also cross-referenced material with: Robert Humphreys and Rowland Ward, 1986. *Religious Bodies in Australia,* Melbourne and Peter Bentley, 'Tricia Blombery and Philip Hughes, 1992. *Faith without the Church? Nominalism in Australian Christianity,* Melbourne, Christian Research Association.

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20. Ian Bertrand, *op.cit.,* p.21.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

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37. See *The New Testament, Book of Acts,* Chapter 5.

38. Pike and Cooper, *op.cit.,* p.94.

39. See *John* 15: 13 and also *The Book of Romans* 5: 7-8.

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44. Pike and Cooper, *op.cit.,* p.93.

45. Ronald Holloway, *op.cit.,* p.49.

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Appendix A

A list of silent films mentioned in this essay.

* Bold indicates that the author has been able to view the film.

Our Social Triumphs (1898)
Soldiers of the Cross (1900)
For the Term of His Natural Life (1908)
Scottish Covenantors (1909)
Heroes of the Cross (1909)
The Life and Adventures of John Vane (1910)
The Bells (1911)
The Christian (1911)
The Fatal Wedding (1911)
The Romantic Story of Margaret Catchpole (1911)
A Ticket in Tatts (1911)
Angel of His Dreams (1912)
The Life Story of John Lee (1912)
The Midnight Wedding (1912)
The Tide of Death (1912)
The Bondage of the Bush (1913)
The Silence of Dean Maitland (1914)
The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell (1916)
Nurse Cavell (1916)
The Church and the Woman (1917)
The Monk and the Woman (1917)
A Coo-ee from Home (1918)
The Joan of Arc of Loos (1918)
Satan in Sydney (1918)
The Woman Suffers (1918)
Yachts and Hearts (1918)
Does the Jazz Lead to Destruction (1919)
* **The Sentimental Bloke (1919)**
Struck Oil (1919)
The Breaking of the Drought (1920)
The Jackeroo of Coolabong (1920)
The Man from Kangaroo (1920)
On Our Selection (1920)
Dad's New Selection (1921)
Know Thy Child (1921)
The Man They Could Not Hang (1921)
Sunshine Sally (1922)
The Dinkum Bloke (1923)
The Reverend Dell's Secret (1924)
Around the Boree Log (1925)
Jewelled Nights (1925)
Environment (1927)
* **For the Term of His Natural Life (1927)**
* **The Kid Stakes (1927)**
The Devil's Playground (1928)