

## Film star who toiled behind the scenes

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# Behind a Velvet Light Trap

By Anthony Buckley

Hardie Grant, 406pp, \$59.95

## Reviewed by Sandra Hall

A big-screen pioneer never doubted that Australians wanted to see Australian films.

IT WAS at Maroubra Beach in the 1950s that I first learnt that films could be made in Australia. I was with school friends inspecting an octopus stranded on the rocks when I was confronted with the equally exotic sight of Robert Newton dressed as Long John Silver. He was looking on while someone extracted a cigarette butt from a rock pool likely to be in the shot.

By then, Anthony Buckley was already working in film. After leaving school, he found a job at a Sydney laboratory, where he was given the task of repairing the negative of Raymond Longford's *The Sentimental Bloke*. This delicate operation was entrusted to a 16-year-old because nobody else in the lab wanted to do it. Longford? Who was he? When a screening of the restored film prompted the press to search for him, he was discovered working as a night watchman on the wharves.

This dispiriting sequel to Longford's once glittering career should have been enough to deter any aspiring filmmaker. After all, Australians in the '50s didn't produce films. Newton was on Maroubra Beach only because his film's American producers had settled on Australia as a cheap location for a seagoing adventure. Yet young Buckley was never among the doubters. His confidence in the thought that Australians wanted to see themselves on screen would make him a pivotal figure in the industry's resurgence. He would produce *Caddie* and *Bliss*, two of the more memorable features of the past 30 years, and he would infuse others with his enthusiasm for the history of Australian film with his documentary *Forgotten Cinema*.

He grew up in a filmmaking household. His father and his uncles all had movie cameras and he had his own magic lantern show. It was the age of the art deco picture palace and the Buckley family were regulars at their local, where he saw his first Australian film. Serendipitously, it was Ken G. Hall's *Orphans of the Wilderness*. Ten years later Hall became his boss at the newsreel company Cinesound.

Buckley could have become a cameraman. Instead, he chose the more introspective ambience of the editing suite - a decision that would bring him some formidable collaborators. He worked with Michael Powell on *Age of Consent*, Ted Kotcheff on *Wake in Fright*, Rudolf Nureyev on the ballet film *Don Quixote* and Patrick White on *The Night the Prowler*.

In short, his has been a career that seems expressly designed to furnish a colourful memoir - which is why *Behind a Velvet Light Trap: A Filmmaker's Journey from Cinesound to Cannes* makes such frustrating reading. Buckley proves to be a writer desperately in need of an editor. His prose plods along at a pace suggesting that he was less interested in telling a story than getting his life's chronology right.

It takes Nureyev to liberate his sense of humour. After the two met in Melbourne on the *Don Quixote* shoot, Buckley was invited to finish editing the film in London, where a cutting room was set up in Nureyev's house. Nureyev was out of town when Buckley arrived and the housekeeper, who didn't speak English, jumped to a logical, but incorrect, conclusion. As a result, Buckley slept in Nureyev's Jacobean four-poster until an interpreter could be found to ask a highly amused housekeeper to settle him in a separate room.

No one succeeds in the film industry without luck. Buckley got his big break in 1970 when he spotted a paperback titled *Caddie: The Autobiography of a Sydney Barmaid* in his local newsagency. He was yet to learn what a producer did. Nonetheless, he came up with the cash to option the rights to the book and his new career was born. Six years later, he was in Cannes with a hit. The film sold well internationally and in Australia it grossed \$2.5 million - still a good result in today's money.

There were failures, too - the films that didn't come together despite the time, effort, money and diplomacy spent in trying to wrestle them onto the screen. Buckley and Bliss's director, Ray Lawrence, attempted to find backing for adaptations of both Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* and Robert Drewe's story *Sweetlip*. And the possibility of filming Cyril Pearl's *Morrison of Peking* preoccupied him for eight years before he finally gave up on it. A planned biopic of the painter Donald Friend went the same way.

But top of the list was Patrick White's *Voss*, a project that encompassed so many twists that it has become the archetypal example of all that can go wrong in the business of adaptation. Buckley made two tilts at it. The last was in the 1990s when he began negotiations with a British entrepreneur who had the rights. When these talks, too, came to nothing, a jaded White was not surprised. The entrepreneur, he said, had once made a film called *Disappearance* - "which is exactly what it did".

Buckley, in contrast, has been a stayer. It's because of the tenacity and foresight of his generation of producers that we still have an Australian cinema. And even though *Behind the Velvet Light Trap* could have more sparkle, it does succeed in putting you inside the industry during its seminal years.