
Film Studies scholars don’t generally write their memoirs, so Brian McFarlane’s *Real and Reel* is an unusual book. McFarlane, modest and self-effacing though he might be, has done more for British cinema history than anyone beyond Rachael Low, and the latter’s seven drily erudite volumes could not be more different from McFarlane’s celebratory *Sixty Voices* (1992) and his *Autobiography of British Cinema* (1997). So it is interesting to find out what led him to his lifelong love affair with British films, the main subject of this short but well-packed memoir.

It is a truism much favoured by those who don’t like to get their hands sullied by parochial matters that the best British films are those made by outsiders: Losey, Polanski, Kubrick, Skolimowski, Antonioni. Appropriately, then, it’s an Australian who makes the strongest case for the artistic and cultural significance of intrinsically British cinema. McFarlane’s passion—weaned as it is on childhood reading of *Picturegoer* and *Picture Show*—is more intense than that of most writers (myself included) who have approached British cinema with varying degrees of enthusiasm. It isn’t that British films were the only ones available to him in small town Victoria in the years after the war; he admits that ‘I didn’t care what pictures I saw as long as they moved’ (20), and he shares Terence Davies’ delight in Hollywood musicals and Lindsay Anderson’s devotion to the films of John Ford. As he explains in Chapter Two ‘What Deprivation Can Do for You’, the limited number of British films that reached Nhill, the hitching post midway between Melbourne and Adelaide where he grew up, made them seem more exotic than the usual Hollywood fare. Years went by before he was able to satisfy his fan magazine-inflamed curiosity about
films like *Good Time Girl* (1947) and *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1948), too risqué for strait-laced Nhill, though he relished the parochialism, the minutiae of everyday life, in the British films he did get to see:

The way people lived in British films kept striking notes you recognised from daily living: you might just conceivably have been a member of the bike club in *A Boy, a Girl and a Bike* (imagine the ingenuousness of a title like that!) or been glad of the avuncular police protection afforded by P.C. George Dixon (Jack Warner) in *The Blue Lamp*; your father might have been a farmer like the one in *Great Day* or gone for a drink at a pub like the one in the same film, and your mother might easily have been a force in the Women’s Institute, often being similarly employed in her own territory. (29)

Blind to the class divisions that plague British society, McFarlane could feel equally at home in the cheery working-class world of *Here Come the Huggetts* (1948) and the Mayfair splendour of *Spring in Park Lane* (1948).

McFarlane’s account of his teenage film fandom, of his student days in Melbourne, of the eighteen months he spent in Hampstead in the 1950s where he met his Australian wife in the post office and became cine-literate watching films at the Everyman, as well as visiting the Academy, the NFT and the old Classic cinemas (*The Petrified Forest* (1936) in Kilburn, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) in Baker Street); his trip to Vienna, where—life imitating art—his wife walks scornfully past him as he waits expectantly in the avenue leading to the cemetery gates, are fascinating and amusing in themselves and one can imagine them being read as Radio 4’s *Book at Bedtime*. But it is his story of how and why he came to write about British cinema that makes this book relevant to the readers of this journal.

Given McFarlane’s starry-eyed enthusiasm for British cinema (‘He is soppy, isn’t he’, the acerbic Lindsay Anderson commented to McFarlane’s long-suffering wife), his project to interview actors, directors, producers and cinematographers for what eventually became *Sixty Voices* and *An Autobiography of British Cinema* could have become a gluttonous luvvy fest. His encounter with his adolescent idol Merle Oberon in Acapulco, however, reveals glimpses of a steel hand inside the velvet glove, and the interviews are sharp and incisive. Where there are eulogies they are not for the over-famous and over-praised but for the dependable character actors (a visit to Windsor excites him not for the opportunity to mingle with the Royals but for a chance encounter with Ealing stalwart Frederick Piper),
and for the unfaded beauties of the 1940s and 1950s: Jean Kent, Googie Withers, Sylvia Syms and Linden Travers in particular. Being Australian helped. McFarlane’s admiration might be unfeigned but it is not uncritical, respect never tips into deference, and he was able to win the cooperation of his subjects by researching their careers thoroughly before interviewing them. As he puts it: ‘There’s surely no point wasting time asking about what can be easily discovered in advance. My only trick as an interviewer was to let drop early on an esoteric bit of information, not to show off but to indicate that they didn’t have to explain everything from scratch’ (147). There’s also an admirable doggedness – finally running Ronald Neame to ground in Deauville after a two-day journey in a hire car from Salzburg – and an imperviousness to insult – necessary in dealing with Lindsay Anderson, who, like many of McFarlane’s interviewees, was eventually won over to friendship.

McFarlane concludes that ‘I sometimes think research is one of life’s most rewarding pastimes, especially if it leads to writing about the matter of your life’s obsessions’ (187). At a time when research is increasingly directed through preordained channels and monitored for ‘impact’ against mechanical standards, this might seem naive. But if one measures McFarlane’s achievements – Sixty Voices, An Autobiography of British Cinema, his indispensable Encyclopedia of British Cinema (first published 2003), The British ‘B’ Film (2009, with Steve Chibnall), not to mention his co-editorship of the MUP series on British Film Makers (with Neil Sinyard) and innumerable essays, articles, reviews and broadcasts – against the output of expensive follies like the AHRC Centre for the Study of British Cinema and Television, lessons might be learnt about what research really means.

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This book is, according to the editors, partly inspired by the recent Ealing centenaries and by the major 2012 season of Ealing films at BFI Southbank. It aims, like the season, to re-evaluate the studio’s output, and to call attention to a broader canon of Ealing work than just the
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A large book or set of books containing facts about a lot of different subjects, usually arranged in alphabetical order: textbook [n]. A book that contains information and ideas about a subject, which you use when you are studying that subject: dictionary [n]. A book that tells you the meaning of words and lists them in alphabetical order. They supported the government’s foreign policy for the new regional order or not, and thus the crisis was in the relationship between theory and practice than that between reality and ideals identified in E.H. Carr’s. Politics, and the police and army as well as right wing activists kept watch on their language and behavior. For Japanese IR scholars before the end of the WWII, keeping a. Certain historically accurate films are fortunate in that they can cover most of the actual events, while still following relatively closely to a narrative template (Apollo 13... This is a very good reason for historical inaccuracies, and also book-to-movie story changes. Now, this can be taken too far, inserting irrelevant stuff for the sake of film making or actor negotiations (I’m looking at you, Great Escape motorcycle chase scene!), but overall it’s a good reason that a movie can be a little historically inaccurate. The bad reason: Because history sells. There’s no real reason for the historical inaccuracies, but they’re put forward in defense of a specific worldview. Free State of Jones comes to mind here.