

Henry Reynolds: *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. Sydney: Currency Press in conjunction with AFC (*Australian Screen Classics Series*), 70 pp. ISBN 978 086819-824-8. **Reviewed by Adi Wimmer.**

There was not enough thought about what the film was actually saying and this was due to Schepisi's commitment to stay true to Keneally's novel (60). Thus a central point in Henry Reynolds's critical study of Fred Schepisi's film *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978). That a film adaptation is not 'true' to its novelistic origin is a frequently heard complaint in film reviews, particularly if the reviewer is a writer or fiction critic. The opposite reproach – the film stays *too close* to the original – is hardly ever heard in film reviewing. But this film is more complicated than that, it being based on a novel which was in turn based on real events. How about "the film did not deviate enough from the real events on which it was based", would historian Henry Reynolds argue that way? Hardly.

Currency Press, the Sydney-based publishing house best known for its valuable publication of Australian playscripts, has started a new critical series titled *Australian Screen Classics*. Three scripts were published in 2008 and all three are reviewed in this issue (see Mandy Kretzschmar's reviews of *The Piano* and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* in this section.) They are slim booklets of between 70 and 90 pages, modelled I think on Methuen's successful series *The Critical Idiom* started in the 1960s, which it resembles in design and format.

According to the introductory editorial by Series Editor Jane Miller, Australia possesses a national cinema which "plays a vital role in our cultural heritage", but which is hampered by a polyphony of competing critical voices, dubious artistic claims, political interferences and constantly changing parameters in screen education. What is needed, writes series editor Jane Mills, is a series of academic studies that serve as a "glue" to stick the above forces together. Hmm. A curious metaphor, "glue". Whether such a glue can ever be found is not only arguable, the glue itself would be highly undesirable. The very idea smacks of censorship, of laying

down aesthetic laws. It would be the end of critical debate if we submitted to a glue tying us to film production units, political functionaries or deans of media study faculties.

But let us progress to the actual booklet. It is neatly organized, with a pronounced emphasis on the real history forming the backdrop to this movie. On 20 July 1900 a 'half-caste' Aborigine named Jimmy Governor and his full-blood brother Jacky Underwood battered to death five whites: Mrs Sarah Mawbey, in her forties, Miss Helen Kerz, her children's mistress, who was in her early twenties, and three Mawbey children aged 11, 14 and 16. 18-year old Elsie Clark, who was visiting, escaped with serious injuries. After leaving his foster-parents' care at the age of 16, Jimmy had become an agricultural labourer and for a short period also a police constable before marrying a white girl and settling down as a rural worker on a large NSW farm. According to Henry Reynold's research, he was good-natured, reliable, not a drinker. He was well liked and there was no ostensible reason why he suddenly turned into a killer.

Thomas Keneally's – and Fred Schepisis's – narrative follow those events closely. A child is born to his wife, but it is not Jimmy's. When an uncle and his half-brother turn up at Jimmy's shack in order to be fed and housed as his relatives, there is a sharp change in the pastoralist's attitude. He cannot accept the company of these "black bastards" who turn his farm into a "natives camp." From that moment on Jimmy gets cheated of his pay and is generally pressured to evict his blood relations. The final straw is Mrs Newby's attempt to separate Jimmy from his white wife: "you must leave them boongs" she advises an apoplectic Mrs Blacksmith. When Mr Newby refuses Jimmy his pay and does not provide any groceries, Jimmy snaps and goes on a rampage in the farmhouse while Newby is away. His murders form the central episode of the narrative, and the homicides are amply explained by the dichotomy between what the whites promise – acceptance in their midst if Jimmy works just like a white severing – and the reality that this is an empty promise.

Five out of the eight chapters in Reynold's study are devoted to the exploration of the historical events. Two chapters are on the critical

and the audience reception, respectively. Even the final chapter is described as a "historian's reflections." So where is the chapter on the merits of the film *as a film*? Nowhere to be found. Reynolds is candid about his approach to the subject matter: it is that of a historian. He does not claim to be in any way a qualified film critic. The admission is admirable, but it does not justify the total absence of any reflections on the aesthetics of the film. Which is there, in no small measure. From the opening of the film with its wonderful vistas of rural and mountainous NSW to its clever inside-outside opposition also in the opening sequence, from shots which show Jimmy's dignified work as an expert fencer or a stableboy to Schepisi's brilliant handling of the 'massacre' scene in which much violent action occurs, but which is conveyed in metaphors such as broken eggs or spilt wine – none of these qualities are noted or debated by Reynolds because he does not discuss the film as a work of cineastic art, but as a variation of a historical document.

As a historian, however, Reynolds is excellent. His knowledge of how rural Aboriginal society functioned at the time results in many interesting glimpses; 60% were in full employment while 30% combined living off the land with part-time work. They were keen to have their children educated and more than 30% attended public schools. Many were landowners who had purchased the land from the government and some had been given land grants. Aborigines were "constantly applying" for 'selector' status, writes Reynolds, but he does not tell us how many were granted the right to select land.

This is the stuff of contextual research, but there are also the records of the case itself. And here we are in for a few surprises. In the film, Jimmy goes berserk because of Mr Newby's duplicitous, arrogant behaviour as he cheats him of the fruits of his labour. In reality, Jimmy got on fairly well with his employer Mr Mawbey. No, it was his wife and daughters plus the teacher Miss Katz with their constant harassment of Jimmy's wife as a 'boong's slut' and other invectives that caused the catastrophe. So much for the alleged greater female sensibility! According to Jimmy Governor's testimony, Sarah Mawbey had taunted Ethel Governor that any white woman who married a 'savage' should be shot. So Jimmy went into his

violent actions in defense of his wife Ethel, in principle a chivalrous action. But what astonished me most is that the real Jimmy Governor was even more brutal than Jimmy Blacksmith. During the subsequent three months while he and his half-brother were on the run, he killed three more women and a baby, he raped a 15-year old girl, he held up nine parties on the highway and robbed them, he burgled 15 huts and set one house on fire (19). The abduction of McCreedy which dominates the final sequence of the film is Keneally's invention. A whole region was terrorized: everyone was armed, no-one worked, whole communities lived as if there was a war or a siege going on. When he was finally captured he showed no remorse – unlike Schepisi's Mort and Jimmy, who show regret and contrition. Reynolds concludes that Jimmy Governor did not plan the murders of Mrs Mawbey or Miss Katz, but he and his brother had for several weeks planned to become bushrangers. In this, they succeeded – and according to the police records Jimmy Governor was proud of "having made [his] name" as a bushranger and "glorified in many of his performances" (20). Local as well as Sydney newspapers turned Governor into a celebrity, journalists vied for interviews, which Governor gladly gave. After his arrest, he chatted amicably with the constables about details of his actions, as if there had been a sporting event. He was, it seems, not maltreated. The film, in the interests of political correctness, has it otherwise. Jimmy is rendered 'speechless' by the law enforcement system and its racist brutality. From the moment that he is shot through the mouth (which technically makes speech impossible) to his execution he never says another word. Others talk about him, size him up, define him. Those are the paradigms liberal academics know and are comfortable with, but they may be false.

Towards the end of his booklet Reynolds engages in an interesting speculation. What can we learn about Australian society in the 1970s by the film's financial failure while it was universally praised by the critics, and why has the film stayed with us – in university courses, in film clubs, and also through regular re-runs on Australian TV? He only raises the question and does not come up with any conclusive answer. Which seem fairly obvious to me: In 1978, Australian society was not yet ready to accept its racist past, while at the same

time there was already a youthful elite of intellectuals around that saw the story of Jimmy Blacksmith in terms of romanticized bushranging, or equally romanticized Vietcong warfare.

So this is a study well worth buying that will more appeal to historians than film lovers. Still, Currency Press ought to produce a second booklet on the same film, one written by a film expert.