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Kenneth George Hall (1901-1994)

Ken Hall apparently saw his first film at Jerdan's Moving Pictures at North Sydney Oval in 1908 sitting on the grass with his parents. He went on to make 17 films between 1932 and 1940 as well as many documentaries concluding with "The Kurnell Story" in 1957.

All this with Hall's philosophy of minimum Government subsidy or interference and every film made with an eye firmly on the Box Office. He had a very firm business sense and was often accused of being a populist. This he may have been but his brand of populism appealed to the mass of Australian people and this was the secret of his success. Even in the 1990's when such films as "Lovers and Luggers" and "Dad Rudd M. P." are shown at special events such as The Festival of Sydney hundreds of people tun up to see them, his films apparently having timeless appeal.

Ken Hall was born 22nd February 1901, the third son of Charles Thomas Hall and Florence Hall, his brother and sister being ten and eleven years older than him. Hall's Grandparents were all English migrants.

Those early films that Hall saw, sometimes illegally by climbing over the fence, were different from those he was to make later in life. They were mostly European and consisted of 3 to 10 minutes of scenes, travel and short melodramas among other novelties. Ken Hall claimed he was born at the same time as movies, electric light, ice cream, aeroplanes, telephone, motor cars and gramophone, a true child of the twentieth century! After doing reasonably well at school, including winning a Gold Medal for Composition as it was called in those days, Hall won a scholarship to High School. His favourite subjects appear to have been History, Geography and English with a strong dislike for Mathematics.

Hall commenced work as a cadet reporter with "The Sydney Evening News" in 1916 and it was in this job that he had his first brush with censorship. He wanted to print a story about a freighter on route to Sydney being hit by a German raider but was prevented by censorship.

In 1917 Hall commenced work in the field of movie making, which was to be his lifelong profession when he joined the publicity staff of Union Theatres and Australasian Films. He began by writing publicity paragraphs before moving on to creating advertising campaigns, publicity stunts, balloon advertisements and in fact anything that would promote a film. At this time he also spent long hours in the film house watching, evaluating and reporting on the chances of success or failure of films. He was also able to study production techniques, directors at work and camera techniques. Hall always expressed the view that as well as getting the making of films into his blood this early experience taught him that no matter how good a film may be it needs to be sold by effective promotion. He always stayed true to those beliefs during his entire film making career.

Ken Hall endeavoured to enlist in 1918 but was refused as being under age.

Stuart Doyle, head of Union Theatres and Australasian Films, appointed Hall as General Manager of the Lyceum Theatre in the early 1920's with responsibility for publicity and competing with other theatres in the same chain. His hours were from 8.30 a.m. to 11.30p.m. six days a week and at the end of each shift he carried the takings along Pitt St. to Bathurst St. before depositing them in a bank in George St., a pretty scary job for a twenty one year old. After about six months in this position he was recalled to head office and appointed as National Publicity Director of the firm.

Hall was a surf lifesaver at Collaroy at this time and it was there that he met Irene who was to become his wife for 47 years.

The American Company, First National Pictures in Australia, later to be incorporated into Warner Brothers Pictures, offered him a position in 1924 which he accepted as it gave him the opportunity to go to America and also the salary was a lot better. It was while here that he clashed with the Commonwealth Censor of the time, Creswell O'Reilly. Censorship was very strict and length of film was measured before and after cutting and total length before and after had to reconcile with the cut pieces of film being handed to the censor in order that voyeurs could not get them, (remember Cinema Paradiso!). This period in cutting gave him good training in film editing and also led to what he called his first "Big Break" when he was offered a job in New York and Hollywood as a publicity director. His fiancée, Irene, was not too keen on him going away for such an extended period however Hall taught her to drive and lent her his new Rugby car to drive while he was away and that overcame the problem.

Working in Hollywood in 1925 gave him an opportunity to meet most of the top stars of the day as well as attending the First National World Convention on Film in Ohio. At this Convention Ken Hall recalls seeing the film, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", at the conclusion of which he remembers three thin bow legged men leaving the theatre and complaining about the fact, "There was not a jockey in the whole bloody thing." Hall also says that this was still the era of silent movies. Actors relied very heavily on facial

expressions and close ups whereas actresses acted with their chests and were known as "chest heavers" using various techniques such as quick short pants, quick heaves or deep slow breathing to portray various emotions.

By the time Hall was working back in Australia in 1926 sound in films was on the way, using synchronised phonographs but this was crude and sound **on the film itself** was still to arrive. A German film called, "Our Emden", had been bought by Ken Hall's boss, John C. Jones, but as the film was almost all German propoganda it would have been a box office disaster in Australia. Ken Hall with the co-operation of The Australian Navy took footage of H.M.A.S. Sydney during gunnery practice. He added all this together, edited, produced and directed virtually a new film. After advertising and publicity the film opened at The Prince Edward Theatre in Sydney on 21st September 1928 and ran for three weeks. This was a good run as most films in those days ran for a week only. Hall then handled a film called "Greenhide", for Charles Chauvel which was not a great success but this was the first meeting of these two film makers.

Stuart Doyle in 1928 offered Ken Hall the job of Publicity Director of The State Theatre and Shopping Block being constructed in Sydney. The theatre was due to open in 1929 and was to cost one million pounds to build on the site of the old "Evening News" building which had been demolished, so in 1929 Hall found himself working on the same site where he had commenced work in 1916. This is, as we know, a very lavish building and opened with an art competition, the third prize being won by a young artist called W. Dobell. This picture is still in the theatre to-day. Unfortunately this was at the start of the great depression and the shops did not let, the complex not really becoming financially viable until World War 2. The basement area of the State was converted by Ken Hall into a mini golf course which was a successful venture at the time. Interestingly Ken G. Hall, in his 1977 autobiography, says that the State Theatre stands as a monument to the past which will have to be pulled down as it cannot be saved on such a valuable site. It is just as well this prediction did not eventuate!

Bert Cross of The Australasian Film Laboratory at Bondi Junction showed Hall a short piece of film with a sound track on one side which had been prepared by Arthur Carrington Smith of Tasmania. As this did not infringe on patent rights held by Western Electric or R.C.A. Hall, tried to interest Stuart Doyle in the technique but without success. After some more experimental film had been made, however, Doyle was convinced and the Cinesound era in Australian film production had begun. A short film showing a shark attack on a dead whale with commentary added was then made and released as, "Thar She Blows",. This premiered on a Sunday Night at The State Theatre and was very favourably received, Ken Slessor of "Smith's Weekly" considering that the sound was better than American productions. The next production was a film called, "That's Cricket", which Hall says contains more stars than any cricket film since, Bradman, McCabe, Kippax, Mailey, Grimmett and Gregory among others.

The real story of Ken Hall and Cinesound started in 1930 when Bert Bailey walked into Ken

Hall's office and said he believed they were going to make a film together. The result was "On Our Selection" which cost 6,000 pounds to make and then grossed 70,000 pounds, a record up to that time for a film in Australia except for Cecil B. de Mille's silent production of "The Ten Commandments". This film held the Australian record until Charles Chauvel's "40,000 Horsemen" in 1940. The whole operation was a bit like the Keystone Cops at times but hard work and dedication made it work. Australasian Films (not yet Cinesound) made the film in the Bondi Skating Rink building with a sound proof studio being erected during the day and then pulled down at night to allow skating to resume. Equipment had to be imported, old cameras were used, power was a real problem and improvisation was very much the order of the day. The old stage cast, Bert Bailey, Fred MacDonald and Alfreda Bevan were assembled, outdoor scenes were shot in the Castlereagh area near Penrith where a real old selector's home, down at heel, tumble down sheds complete with creepers was found. It was sold to Britain as, "Down on the Farm." as the British did know what a selection was.

During the filming of "On Our Selection" Hall was asked by Stuart Doyle to start a newsreel in competition with Fox-Movietone News. Bert Cross did the filming while Hall wrote the script for Charles Lawrence and Cinesound Review started in November 1931 with an art card start, the leaping kangaroo coming later. Cinesound Review lasted for over forty years and only ever used Australian stories except during the war and even then all stories used concerned Australian servicemen. and were shot by Australian cameramen. Cinesound eventually merged with Fox-Movietone News and the whole operation folded in 1975 following the coming of television.

"On Our Selection" opened at The Capitol Theatre followed by an Australia wide release and Hall was offered a job as head of the Australian division of the said Movietone News but he decided to stay with when Stuart Doyle put him on a percentage basis and said to him, "never make a flop." Ken Hall always maintained this philosophy but says he never became rich on this basis.

The year 1933 saw the making of "The Squatter's Daughter" from a play written by Bert Bailey and rewritten for film by E. V. Timms. With the proceeds from "On Our Selection" the studio was enlarged, Frank Hurley, was engaged as cameraman and a property at Goonoo Goonoo near Tamworth supplied up to 10,000 sheep for filming. Outdoor and bushfire scenes were shot near Wallacia. While this film was a hit undoubtedly the world scoop of 1932 was the Cinesound filming of de Groot slashing the ribbon at the opening of The Sydney Harbour Bridge. Hall and Cinesound were the only ones on the spot with cameras as other newsmakers did not take the threat of the New Guard seriously.

The next film "The Silence of Dean Maitland" was rewritten from an old English story which Hall thought was quite laughable This was a fairly daring story for 1933, especially as Creswell O'Reilly was still Commonwealth Censor. Eventually O'Reilly ordered that one kiss

should be shortened in length but in the end this only helped with publicity. The film was a great hit, being filmed around Camden to give the impression of English countryside and selling to England for 40,000 pounds.

The next film "Strike Me Lucky" starring Roy Rene, "Mo", was the only one of eighteen feature films made by Hall and Cinesound which did not succeed financially. Ken Hall accepts most of the blame for this himself. A vaudeville type film "Cinesound Varieties" starring Fred Bluett had also been made and this was described as "forgettable".

Following a holiday trip to Cairns, Hall went to America in 1935 to study film making techniques at 20th Century Fox Studios. While there he learnt special techniques including background filming which means taking a film of special background scenes and then superimposing shots of actors in front of these scenes. He also learnt the technique of miming in films. The film "Thoroughbred" was made at Kia-ora Stud at Scone with Lance and Violet Skuthorpe doing the equestrian scenes. This was followed by "Orphan of the Wilderness", a film about a baby kangaroo which was filmed in the Burragorang Valley. This film won Film Critic's Award for 1936 as the best Australian film of the year.

Cecil Kellaway then approached Ken Hall with script for a film called "It Isn't Done" which he made against the advice of Stuart Doyle. This film was a smash hit in Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain. Following three commercially successful films in 1936, three more were made in 1937, "Tall Timbers", "Lovers and Luggers" and "Broken Melody". Special effects such as miniature forests were used in "Tall Timbers" which the critics did not pick. Hall points out that it cost 14,000 pounds to make compared with "Towering Inferno" costing 14 million dollars.

"Lovers and Luggers", which incidentally is still being shown at the Powerhouse Museum and was always considered by Hall to be one of the best films made by Cinesound, was a real test of film techniques of the day. Outside scenes were shot at Thursday Island, some underwater scenes including the famous fight sequence were made in North Sydney Olympic Pool and Frank Hurley as cameraman, by using background photography and inserts, was able to bring a diver from the bottom of Torres Strait over the edge of a lugger in the studio at Bondi Junction and then talk to people on the deck.

At the end of filming in 1937 Stuart Doyle lost control of Greater Union Theatres and it they were taken over by Norman B. Rydge with the aid of bankers and financial institutions (sounds familiar). Stuart Doyle went to London and he and Hall fell out for a while but were later reconciled.

In 1938 Hall bought the rights to "Broken Melody" the first book written by Frederick J Thwaites, rewrote the story and made a very successful film using the same name. This film featured a big climactic finish which Hall always liked to have in his films. He used 50



members of the S.S.O., the full Sydney Male Choir, 3 soloists and a female chorus with a musical score written by Alfred Hill. Hall then made two films with George Wallace, "Let George Do It" and "Gone to the Dogs". Cinesound ceased production in 1940 and in the period between "Broken Melody" in 1938 and then 6 comedies in a row were made. These were the two George Wallace films, "Mr. Chedworth Steps Out", "Dad and Dave Come to Town", "Come Up Smiling" and "Dad Rudd M.P."

Early in the Second World War Hall offered to set up a body comprising the Department of Information, the three services and professional film makers to look after filming of the war, This was refused as each of the services had their own film unit, as Hall, says staffed by untrained cameramen. Hall stayed with The Department of Information, personally seeing every bit of film made during the war and saying that the only usable film came from The Department of Information staff, the material supplied by the services photographers being next to useless. A young unknown photographer, Damien Parer, sent film back of the battle of the Bismarck Sea taken while crouching behind the pilot's head. Damien Parer, Frank Hurley, George Silk (of Simpson and his donkey fame) and others met up in Cairo and filmed the war extensively..

With recruiting lagging rather badly Hall was asked to make a half hour film called "100,000 Cobbers" which he did despite some difficulties. In 1942 Damien Parer made his famous film of the Kokoda Trail which was later produced as Cinesound's "Kokoda Front Line" which won an Academy Award, the only time an Oscar was awarded to a newsreel. Ken Hall strongly believed that the Australian war effort was not sufficiently recognised because of better American propaganda. He also says that two people stand out in his memory, Damien Parer and John Curtin. Two other documentaries made by Hall were "Anzacs in Overalls" in 1942 and "South West Pacific" in 1943.

In late 1944 Hall was approached by Nick Pery of Columbia Pictures to make film in order to expatriate American money frozen in Australia during the war. Several ideas were suggested and eventually a film on the life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith was agreed on, naturally to be called "Smithy". The old "Southern Cross" was rebuilt, Ron Randell was engaged as the star and the film was entirely American owned and financed. This opened to good reviews in 1946 at The State Theatre and Norman Rydge then arranged for Hall to go to London to see the Rank organisation, a trip which took 8 days and 9 nights by a Sunderland flying boat. He also visited Ealing Studios and discussed plans for expansion of film making in Australia before going on to America and clashing with Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures who cut 27 minutes from "Smithy" , cut all references to Australian input and called the film "Pacific Adventure" for American release where it failed.

By 1947 film costs were getting out of hand and Charles Chauvel's "Sons of Matthew" took two and a half years to make. Altogether 245,000 feet of film were taken and only 9,000 feet were used in the final production. Hall feels that this film was the end of Cinesound. No

more films were made in the old studios. The premises were sold to a company with a franchise to produce Canada Dry drinks and all staff were out of work some after thirty years work with the company. Canada Dry failed, Chips Rafferty and Lee Robinson took over the premises and also failed and finally the premises were used by The British Tobacco Company, later to become W.D. & H.O Wills.

By 1951 television was coming and after the closure of the studios the newsreel and documentary operation were moved to the old Amusu Theatre in Balmain. In 1952 Norman Rydge and John Davis of the Rank Organisation decided to make no further films in Australia. From then until 1956 Ken Hall oversaw the Cinesound Review, a weekly screen news magazine which covered many social issues of the day. This was all part of the Ken Hall urge to put something on film.

At the age of 56 years with no projects in mind a call came from Frank Packer of Channel 9, for whom Cinesound was preparing daily news bulletins, offering him a job as Chief Executive of Television and Channel 9, which he accepted. He describes the next 9 years of his life as "the most hectic, exciting, devastating, exhilarating years of his life" and says that "he wouldn't have missed them for worlds".

Throughout his life Ken G. Hall strongly believed that a film should be commercially viable and firmly aimed at the box office. He shows little time for the so-called "Art Films" and believes that minimum Government interference by way of subsidy is required. Many times Ken Hall was accused of being a frankly commercial director, which he does not dispute, saying that every film must be made with an eye to the box office, tight schedules, close attention to budget and, of course, "**know how.**" Most of his films were made in a thirty-six day period and Ken Hall always doubted the value of so-called "art films", saying that, "There can be no stable film industry in Australia unless it is founded on commercially successful films."

The criterion by which Ken Hall made his films was to give the public films they want to see otherwise the public "**just stays away**". By any standards he met that criterion.

Ken Hall was awarded the O. B. E. in 1972 and an A.O. in 1986.

Ken G Hall died on Tuesday 8th February 1994, his wife, Irene, having died in 1972.

Ken Hall was initiated in Lodge Anima No. 421, a daylight lodge, on 12th December 1922, Passed on 6th February 1923 and Raised on 29th May 1923. He affiliated with Lodge Sirius No. 292. on 31st December 1925, before calling off from Anima on 17th January 1927 and then calling off from Sirius on 11th April 1929.

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