

# Indonesia Calling Joris Ivens and Australia

ON AUGUST 17, 1945, A LITTLE OVER A WEEK AFTER AMERICAN ATOM BOMBS LEVELLED HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI, THE YOUNG INDONESIAN INDEPENDENCE ACTIVIST SOEKARNO, SPEAKING FROM HIS FRONT GARDEN AT 56 PEGANGSAAN TIMOAR IN BATAVIA (NOW JAKARTA) ON BEHALF OF THE 90 MILLION ACROSS AN ARCHIPELAGO FROM JAVA TO WESTERN PAPUA, PROCLAIMED INDEPENDENCE OVER WHAT WAS AT THAT TIME THE JAPANESE OCCUPIED DUTCH COLONY OF THE NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES. THESE EVENTS DELIVERED A MAJOR FOREIGN POLICY DILEMMA TO AUSTRALIAN LABOUR PRIME MINISTER BEN CHILLY: SHOULD THE AUSTRALIANS SUPPORT THEIR WARTIME EUROPEAN ALLIES IN REPRESSING THE POST-COLONIAL NATIONALISTS TO THE NORTH? OR SHOULD THEY RECOGNISE REGIONAL ANTI-COLONIAL MOVEMENTS AS ESSENTIAL PARTNERS IN A NEW POST-WAR WORLD? IN COMPLICATED WAYS THEY TRIED TO DO BOTH, AND MATTERS UNRESOLVED AT THAT TIME – WEST PAPUA IN PARTICULAR – CONTINUE TO TROUBLE AUSTRALIAN-INDONESIAN RELATIONS TO THIS DAY.

BY JOHN HUGHES

Henri Pieck, *50 Million Indonesians silenced* (detail), lithography, 1929. Coll. IISG.

Marion Michelle, *Indonesian and Australian workers during a waterfront rally in Sydney, November 1945*. Coll. EFJI-M Marion Michelle. © EFJI

The scale of the exodus when the Dutch fled Japanese occupation in early 1942 was enormous. The whole apparatus of Dutch colonial administration was transported by ship and emergency airlifts through Broome and to other ports in Australia. Fifty-seven aircraft arrived in Broome in one day; they would refuel and return through treacherous skies threatened by the internment camps that housed Dutch political prisoners evacuated from Dutch concentration camps in western Papua, where Indonesian independence activists had been exiled since the 1920s. Australians became aware of the internment of these men when one prisoner managed to toss a note to a railway worker at Liverpool Station in Sydney

*'...to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it "as it really was"; but to grasp hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.'*

Japanese 'zero' fighters bringing files, arms and personnel. In two weeks there were 8000 refugees from the Indies in Broome. This hasty surrender provided the staging post for Japanese bombing raids on Broome and Darwin.

Within twelve months or so the Dutch were operating a number of government departments on Australian soil. Among these were

during transfer to the internment camp at Cowra. After a long campaign those interned were finally released (December 1943). They began to meet with Indonesian seamen, soldiers and administrative staff who were working around the country with the NEI government-in-exile. These were the people that formed the core of Indonesian independence activism in Australia.

Another office of the Netherlands East Indies government-in-exile was a film division. Joris Ivens, the newly appointed Film Commissioner began to assemble his unit. Among those drawn to work with Joris Ivens was the Australian radio star, writer and actor Catherine Duncan (see 'In Memoriam: Catherine Duncan 1915-2006', *EFJI Newsmagazine* 12: December 2006). She was something of a celebrity in Australia. She won an Oscar in the mid 1940s for her radio performances and was determined to get into documentary filmmaking - the "it" avant-garde cultural form of the moment. It was Catherine Duncan who introduced Ivens to Indonesian independence activists.

1 At precisely the moment that the Indonesian independence crisis was unfolding, other arms of government in Australia were working toward the establishment of a government film production agency like that of the Dutch, and of the National Film Board of Canada. 'Nugget' Coombs as Director General of the Department of Post War Reconstruction, initiated in 1942 a series of actions that resulted finally - with important and constraining, possibly crippling, compromises - in Cabinet approval for the establishment of the Australian National Film Board that held its first meeting in May 1945.

In June 1945, Joris Ivens spoke to a meeting of the ANFB with an address entitled 'the meaning of documentary film in national development'. Little could he have known at that time that he was soon to make a decision regarding 'documentary film in national development' that would exile him from his homeland for decades.

Ivens' principle task as the Netherlands Film Commissioner was to make works documenting and presumably propagating harmonious civil affairs following the re-occupation of the Netherlands East Indies, and then to establish a film unit for post-war reconstruction in cooperation with the Indonesian population. However, the United States' FBI had been worrying about Joris Ivens since opening their file on him soon after he arrived in the US to work on the Roosevelt New Deal films (*Power and the Land*, 1940) and with Capra on the 'Why We Fight' series during the war. The FBI considered him "one of the most dangerous communists in the United States". General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of Allied

Forces in the Pacific, therefore banned Ivens from war zones. So Ivens found that he and his crew were not invited to join the first shipload of political apparatus returning to Java with the intention of crushing the insurgency and re-establishing Dutch rule.

Behind the back of the Australian government the Dutch began forcing Indonesian soldiers under their command in Australia onto aircraft for flights out of Bundaberg to fight their countrymen across the islands. There was mutiny. Indonesians who refused service were arrested and held behind barbed wire at Casino in NSW. And when the Dutch started arresting Australians who refused to load munitions it became a matter for the press (October 1945). Loaded with troops, arms and ammunition, Dutch government officials urgently tried to leave Brisbane, where their navy was mostly docked. The waterside unions refused to load the ships, the seamen manning tugboats refused to work. Dutch shipping and Dutch business was declared black across the country as the Trade Union movement rallied in support of Indonesian Independence. Eventually the ACTU came on board under the slogan 'everything Dutch is black' (Lockwood, 1975).

Large numbers of Indian seamen were flown into Australia by the Dutch and Australian governments with the intention that they would fill the role that the Indonesians had refused. But Indian seamen as a rule were no more interested in supporting the reestablishment of colonial rule in the Asia Pacific region than the Indonesians. They too walked off in droves, leaving the Australian government with the dilemma of what to do - as the 'white Australia policy' was alive and well - with a growing number of non-white, unemployed, mutinous seamen. The frontlines of Indonesian Independence were here on the Australian docks, the ports of Java, and with the propaganda war for political support and public opinion.

2 Joris Ivens took the decision to back the Indonesians, and to defy the government that employed him. He resigned as NEI Film Commissioner and announced his reasons at a press conference at the Menzies Hotel in Sydney (November 21, 1945). This was reported on the front page of the *New York Times*. Working out of his flat in Elizabeth Bay, with Marion Michelle, Catherine Duncan, Indonesian activists and former political prisoners, and

with support from the Waterside Workers, the activist documentary *Indonesia Calling!* began to take shape. The producer was Eddie Allison, who later in 1946 made *Coal Dust*, and in the early 1950s established the alternative distribution company Quality Films in Sydney that dealt with non-theatrical distribution of eastern European art cinema and British and American 'political' documentaries.

Working clandestinely, while very ill, with this remarkable 'multi-cultural' team, Joris Ivens with Marion Michelle as principle cinematographer, documented the events of the blockade: "a film about the ships that did not sail"; with commentary by Catherine Duncan, and narrated by fellow Australian New Theatre actor Peter Finch.

The film was made against enormous odds; there was very little available equipment or stock, indeed an Australian security file includes a hand written note; 'Kodak agreed not supply Mr Ivens with film footage' (sic) (NAA: A6126/XMO). Film stock may have been 'donated' by Australian soldiers returning from Borneo, and 'short ends' were donated by Harry Watt, here in Australia making *The Overlanders*. John Heyer shot scenes for the film, as did Ken Coldicutt in Melbourne. Arthur Higgins, Alex Poignant, Merv Murphy and his partner at Supreme Sound, Gwen Oakley, all contributed to work on the film.

*Indonesia Calling!* was screened publicly for the first time in Australia at the Kings Cross Newsreel Theatre on August 9, 1946, to audiences mostly of Indonesians. While arguments about banning the film raged in Federal Parliament, prints were smuggled out of the country and exhibited in outdoor screenings in villages in Java and elsewhere.

3 When the Australian National Film Board's first Producer-in-Chief Stanley Hawes arrived from Canada to take charge of the embryonic Film Division - the production arm of the ANFB - he inherited Department of Information newsreel units. Some of the people Hawes wanted to hire in the late 1940s and early 1950 were simply vetoed by security; others, having been hired, were sacked without any consultation with Hawes at all. (Oral history interview, Stanley Hawes: 1973) Catherine Duncan slipped through; early in 1947 she wrote and directed the Divisions first series, *Australia and Your Future* for the Immigration Department: *Men Wanted* (1947),



Flyer for Australians with information about the young Republic of Indonesia, 1946. Coll. JIA/EFJI

Bulletin Indonesian Seaman, 1945. Coll. JIA/EFJI

Clipping about action of Dutch ships against Australian demonstrators.

*Christmas Under the Sun* (1947) and *This is the Life* (1947). The security services soon realised that the government's film production house - with its mandated brief to deliver all government department film needs - had among its staff people who had worked on *Indonesia Calling!*

As the Cold War escalated, and Australia became increasingly enmeshed in the UK/US nuclear programmes, these brought with them increased security apparatus. Catherine Duncan was a prime target among many. The spooks concluded that her relationships with various men, Joris Ivens among them, and others at the Australian National Film Board's Film Division constituted a threat to national security. Indeed, the Division's Producer-in-Chief Stanley Hawes, was himself suspected of illicit relations with Catherine Duncan. This, along with the fact that she was still believed to be in contact with Joris Ivens, led to security vetoes for decades afterwards on a number of people with whom she was associated. These dossiers, of course, were secret, and none of those effected, despite what suspicions they may have had, could know of their existence, let alone being given the opportunity to know their accusers or answer the allegations against them.

"An undoubted communist" the security files asserted of Catherine Duncan, "she slept with anyone and did not care who knew it." And all those networked with her therefore: "due to their past intimate relationships with Communist Catherine Duncan ... could be call(ed) 'to heel whenever it suited her'". Furthermore, the security logic concluded, "Consequently information concerning the current activities of the Film Division... could be passed not only to the Communist Party of Australia but also abroad, possibly to Ivens" (sic) (NAA: 6119: 4046) Because of their work with Joris Ivens the security services closely watched and 'spoiled' security clearances and

job opportunities for those involved with *Indonesia Calling!* At one point the security apparatus of the Department of Supply's division that was managing security around the Australian/UK atom bomb testing suggested that these people should simply be culled during one of the many 'restructures' of the Film Division.

The suspicions held and damage done to the lives and work of all of these people in the name of national security were, in each case, smear without substance. Stanley Hawes' defence of some of these people contributed to his own difficulties - he was under enormous suspicion and pressure during his career with the variously named Film Division / Commonwealth Film Unit / Film Australia. The security agencies considered him a secret communist, classified him as 'adversely known' and a security risk up until about a year before he retired from the public service in 1970 (he was on limited contracts from 1946 until 1970; he was never given public service permanency). They also suspected him of being a spy, possibly because he had been recommended to the National Film Board by the first Film Commissioner, Canadian Ralph Foster, who fell foul of the Canadian Espionage Royal Commission of 1946.

This Canadian Royal Commission also undermined John Grierson, a friend of Hawes, and Film Commissioner at the time with the National Film Board of Canada. Grierson left Canada 'under a cloud' at this time as a result of the smears against him. (Kristmanson, 1998, Don Wall in Scher [ed], 1992)

4 Complex military and diplomatic negotiations proceeded on the ground in Indonesia, at the UN in New York and between 'stakeholders' in Australia, including the Waterside Workers' Federation. Australia finally came to a position in support of the Indonesian's cause, and was able to establish

its legitimacy with the emerging Indonesian leadership because of the support that had been demonstrated by Australian citizens in the boycotts and the film.

The film documents the first crucial six months of the blockade; however, over the course of a four year period over 550 vessels were affected. The Chifley Labour government's refusal to intervene against the waterfront unions, despite the government's ambivalence, was undoubtedly a factor in the success of the campaign. A negotiated settlement brokered by a United Nations 'Good Officers Committee' - a committee to which Australia's participation was nominated by the Indonesians - delivered a United States of Indonesia under the leadership of Soekarno which was handed sovereignty by the Dutch in late 1947. This became the Republic of Indonesia in 1956.

After the Chifley-Evatt Labour government fell in December 1949, the conservative Menzies government reversed the momentary autonomy of Australian foreign policy achieved in the war and immediate post war years in favour of policy development mediated through the old metropolitan powers. Australia participated in the covert trafficking of arms to anti-Soekarno uprisings in the Moluccas in 1952. The ongoing covert destabilisation against the 'non-aligned' movement finally climaxed with devastating force in the military coup of 1965 that deposed Soekarno and brought the pro-American dictator Soeharto to power. Estimates vary, and the number of those killed during purges that followed over several years will never be known, but best estimates say something in the order of 800,000 people were killed in what the *New York Times* described at the time as "one of the most savage mass slayings of modern political history". (Guardian [UK], July 19, 2000) Many of the young activists seen in *Indonesia Calling!* were murdered or 'disappeared' during that time.

5

Forces in contest within Australia, the United Nations and in the region in the early post-war years enabled a start to be made to an independent Republic of Indonesia and to a committed and engaged independent film culture

here in Australia. Soon the Cold War locked off this early post-war optimism - optimism for both an independent cinema and 'imagined communities' of independent nations forging their own futures with autonomy from metropolitan power. The Cold War

instead nurtured another kind of 'secret history'. The remarkably salient memory that remains is that of the effectiveness and value of a small film, advocating independence, and performing it, in interesting times



Australian filmmaker John Hughes' new project engages with *Indonesia Calling!* With an emphasis on the making of the film, fundamental relationships between Australia and Indonesia and the impact of Joris Ivens on the early post-war Australian documentary film culture. His most recent film *The Archive Project*, a feature documentary concerning the little known Realist film movement in Melbourne (1945-59) has been recognised with a number of awards including Critics Circle, 'Best Feature Documentary', an Australian Teachers of Media Award, the inaugural 'Joan Long Award for Achievement, Australian film history', Australasian Film and History Conference, 2006 and the NSW Premier's Award. Also in 2006, Hughes was awarded the 'Stanley Hawes Award for Lifelong commitment to Australian documentary'. An on-line work presenting the 60 year history of Film Australia, entitled 'Moving History', made in collaboration with the national public broadcaster ABC On-line and Film Australia, can be accessed at: [www.abc.net.au/aplacetothink/#watch/](http://www.abc.net.au/aplacetothink/#watch/). Previous work for film and television includes *Hidden Treasures Series One & Two*, *The Art of War*, *River of Dreams*, *After Mabo*, *What I Have Written and One Way Street*. He can be contacted at [jheworks@websurf.net.au](mailto:jheworks@websurf.net.au)

Recently I had the pleasure of travelling from Melbourne to Nijmegen for an introductory period of research with the EFJI in pursuit of a project concerning the making of *Indonesia Calling!* The project *INDONESIA CALLING: Joris Ivens in Australia* revisits the making of the film, fills out a number of dimensions of the historical context of events depicted, and elaborates something of the legacy that this small film had in Australia for an emerging tradition of independent documentary here.

Readers will be familiar with '*Indonesia Calling!*', Joris Ivens' twenty-two minute, 1945-46 film made under very trying conditions and following Ivens' resignation in Sydney in November 1945 as Film Commissioner for the Dutch East Indies. The *EFJI Newsmagazines* have published a number of essays related to this work; Robert Hamilton and Laura Kotevska's essay arguing that the film anticipates an Australian multi-culturalism at a time when the notorious 'white Australia' policy was still practiced is one example (*EFJI Newsmagazine* 11: November 2005).

Another is Gerda Jansen-Hendriks' scholarly reflection on a number of films depicting events surrounding the birth of Indonesia and the Dutch retreat from its former colony.

In particular Gerda Jansen-Hendriks considers in its relationship with *Indonesia Calling!*, *Through Darkness to Light*, made by colleagues of Ivens from the early period of the Dutch Film League avant-garde, Jan Moi and Mannus Franken, who took up the government commission that Ivens refused. She makes the point that "it is remarkable that a documentary about post-war Indonesia does not once name the newly proclaimed republic, nor

show Soekarno." She notes that Ivens' film - 'a film about the ships that did not sail', documenting as it does the very effective boycott of Dutch ships by the Waterfront unions in Australia - does not have any footage of Indonesia. She also makes the important point that a high degree of violence accompanying the independence struggle has been insufficiently represented in many accounts favouring the depiction of a heroic independence movement. (*EFJI Newsmagazine* 9: November 2003:21)

Gerda Jansen-Hendriks' essay, (and in another register the essay from Robert Hamilton and Laura Kotevska) remind us of that often complex historical complicity between myth, advocacy, nationalism, and documentary.

Within the extraordinary oeuvre of Joris Ivens' documentary century '*Indonesia Calling!*' is sometimes considered more a 'pamphlet' than a work inviting nuanced aesthetic

appreciation. It is an instance where the urgency of social justice - and in this case a specifically post-colonial ambition - to some extent negates the aesthetic modernism that Bill Nichols talks about as one voice in the dynamic of documentary tradition as it negotiated notions and practices of realism, modernism and rhetoric (Nichols in Bakker, 1999).

Within a tradition of advocacy and activism - a tradition that comes into focus today with the emergence of new forms of agit-prop cinema drawing on new technologies for production, distribution and exhibition - it may be that films like '*Indonesia Calling!*' are suddenly recognisable in their immediacy, their militancy, their urgency and their usefulness. The old documentary 'sell-line': 'films with a purpose', a slogan devalued and dormant now for some time, in the present moment suddenly regains its pertinence.

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Marion Michelle, During the shooting of *Indonesia Calling!*: Indonesian seamen, Joris Ivens and British filmmaker Harry Watt, 1945. Coll EFJI-Marion Michelle © EFJI

