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Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol5/iss1/4
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Abstract
Australia has a rich labour history, arising out of the struggle of workers and their families to obtain fair wages and conditions and maintain a decent standard of living. Millions of words have been written on aspects of the labour movement and industrial relations in Australia, especially since the time of the great strikes of the 1890s and moves towards federation during the latter part of that decade. However local cinema contains precious few examples of feature films which bring a fair and thorough account of those struggles to the attention of the masses. The stories are there, the drama is evident. So why the absence? Why the silence? Why have Australian filmmakers shied away from portraying, and even glorifying where it is warranted, industrial conflict and the experiences of workers in seeking a better deal? Where are the dramatic presentations of picket lines, strikes and, in particular, mine disasters such as Bulli (1887) and Mount Keira (1902) which were tragedies on a world scale? This article investigates the production of the 1912 Australian silent movie Strike and the visit of the filmmakers to the New South Wales coal mining district of the Illawarra.

Keywords
Australian film, silent film, Illawarra, workers, strike
Looking for Australia’s Earliest Workers’ Film

Michael Organ

To secure a picture for their forthcoming production of “Strike” the principal actors of the Australian Film Company Limited journeyed to a coal mine on the South Coast last week. (Referee, Sydney, 17 January 1912)

Australia has a rich labour history, arising out of the struggle of workers and their families to obtain fair wages and conditions and maintain a decent standard of living. Millions of words have been written on aspects of the labour movement and industrial relations in Australia, especially since the time of the great strikes of the 1890s and moves towards federation during the latter part of that decade. However local cinema contains precious few examples of feature films which bring a fair and thorough account of those struggles to the attention of the masses. The stories are there, the drama is evident. So why the absence? Why the silence? Why have Australian filmmakers shied away from portraying, and even glorifying where it is warranted, industrial conflict and the experiences of workers in seeking a better deal? Where are the dramatic presentations of picket lines, strikes and, in particular, mine disasters such as Bulli (1887) and Mount Keira (1902) which were tragedies on a world scale?

Australia was quick to adopt film as a form of mass entertainment when it became widely available in the early 1900s. By 1921 the local population of 6 million was responsible for some 68 million attendances at the cinema annually. Going to the flicks was “a national obsession” and Australians, per capita, were the “keenest filmgoers in the world.” Newsreels and actuality (documentary) films were produced locally from 1896, with Melbourne’s Salvation Army Limelight Department playing a prominent role. In 1902 it exhibited Under Southern Skies, a two-hour-long documentary history of Australia comprising 200
lantern slides and 6000 feet (100 minutes) of film. Australia also led the world in the presentation of the feature film as we know it today, with the world’s first full-length feature, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, produced in Victoria during 1906. At 4000 feet, or 66 minutes long, it outran the 5–10 minute American Nickelodeon features of the day and revealed the local audience’s interest in a sustained narrative. In comparison, Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) ran for 12 minutes and Frenchman George Méliès’ *Voyage à Travers l’Impossible* (1904) for 30 minutes.

Australia’s earliest feature films contained accounts of bushrangers—*The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), *Robbery Under Arms* (1907), convicts (*For the Term of His Natural Life* (1908), *Assigned to His Wife* (1911), *The Mark of the Lash* (1911)); and the gold rush era—*Eureka Stockade* (1907), *The Miner’s Daughter* (1911); along with melodramas focusing on life in the bush—*The Squatter’s Daughter* (1910), *On Our Selection* (1920), *A Girl of the Bush* (1921); and, to a lesser extent, city life—*The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), *The Kid Stakes* (1927). The scope and variety of that first generation of Australian feature production is revealed in Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper’s *Australian Film 1900–1977—A Guide to Feature Film Production*. Of the 488 items listed therein, some 258 were produced prior to the widespread introduction of sound in 1930. The silent era (1896–1929) was therefore a relatively prolific one for Australian filmmakers, at least until 1913 when a combine of local theatre owners and distributors killed feature production off.

Sport, as an important element of working-class life and culture, featured heavily in Australian film production during this period. David Headon has argued convincingly that audiences then, as now, wanted more than simple saccharine sweet melodrama or comedic shorts when they went to the cinema. They were looking for local product, and sport was no exception. Newsreel footage featuring significant national sporting events such as the Melbourne Cup and boxing championships were popular, as were feature films dealing with the racing industry—*Keane of Kalgoorlie* (1911) and *The Double Event* (1911)—and the Australian male’s often disastrous penchant for gambling—*The Breaking of the Drought* (1920). The desire for local product did not, however, override the demand for quality material, whether it be in the form of feature, actuality, comedic or newsreel film.

A study of Pike and Cooper’s listing reveals that the industrial struggles of the working classes in areas such as coal mines, factories, and the bush were largely absent from the screen during the silent era, and no such tradition has developed in the interim. Many Australian films do contain elements portraying
what could be defined as class struggle, though this is rarely
their focus. The numerous accounts of the uprising at the Eureka
Stockade (1907, 1915, 1949, 1971) could be considered for
inclusion, along with those of the Kelly Gang (1906, 1920, 1923,
1934, 1951, 1970, 2003). Both bring to the cinema a true-to-
life, uniquely Australian perspective on working-class rebellion
against injustice, though not in the context of the workplace.
The more recent post-apocalyptic Mad Max series (1979, 1981,
1985) follows in that tradition of rebellious heroes, though the
links with Australian history are tenuous. Neither Eureka nor
the story of the Kelly Gang have at their centre a portrayal of
working-class struggle, nor of the value of unionism, nor for that
matter of the fight for a “fair go” in an industrial sense (something
the nation traditionally holds dear). So where are those stories
in Australian feature films?

They do exist, though they are few in number. The Sentimental
Bloke (1919), underneath its overarching love story, portrayed the
working-class struggle of city folk, though not in an industrial
context. Three in One (1956), a movie about mateship, included
a section entitled ‘The Union buries its Dead’, though it never
found a local distributor.12 Sunday Too Far Away (1975) dealt
with the 1956 shearer’s strike. Protected (1975) concerned the
1957 strike by Aboriginal workers at Palm Island. Strikebound
(1983) presented an account of a 1930s coal mine strike. On the
documentary side there are numerous examples. Between 1897–
1909 the Salvation Army’s Limelight Department took footage
of workers at industrial sites including coal and metal mines,
smelting works and dockland areas, some of which was included
in Under Southern Skies (1902).13 The work of the Waterside
Workers’ Federation Film Unit is of note, producing a number of
films “by workers for workers” between 1953–8.14 A more recent
example is Tom Zubrycki’s Kemira—Diary of a Strike (1984),
recording the sit-in at Kemira coal mine near Wollongong.

In looking for evidence of working-class stories in Australian
feature films from the silent era we are hampered not only by
the apparent lack of material, but also by the fact that some
90% of such films have not survived, due to neglect, wear and
tear, and chemical deterioration.15 It is often only via posters,
printed ephemera, stills, newspaper and magazine notices and
reviews, and oral history testimony from industry players that
the existence of individual film projects is known. Perhaps an
even greater percentage of silent newsreel and actuality film has
also been destroyed.

A night out at the flicks during the silent era usually involved
a viewing of comedy shorts and the lengthier feature melodramas,
intermixed with newsreel gazette items. Music and sound may or may not have been part of the program. Non-feature film offered a possible source of information on Australian and working-class issues, though the majority of newsreels, both local and foreign, were banal, aiming to entertain rather than inform. Topics such as unemployment, breadlines and political oppression were taboo, though of course there were exceptions.

In 1908 the local firm of T.J. West presented packed houses in Sydney and Melbourne with footage of the 24 July Sydney tram strike, including ‘the violence of an angry mob; the derailing of a stationary tram car in George Street; inspectors returning the cars to the depots; and a tram worked by ‘blacklegs’ with troopers patrolling the streets.’ The following year J. & N. Tait featured footage of the Broken Hill strike, and a surviving film gazette item from 1917 reports on a march and rally in Sydney’s Domain during the great railway strike that year.

With strikes and demonstrations a common feature of the Australian political landscape throughout the twentieth century, the opportunity existed to keep abreast of such issues via film. However, local and overseas evidence would suggest that such opportunities were limited, and subject to censorship.

It is ironic that whilst the working classes have traditionally formed the bulk of the cinema going public, film has not reflected working-class struggle to any substantial degree, especially in Australia and America. This is in contrast to the situation in Communist countries such as Russia and China where there has been a proliferation of government-sponsored films dealing with class war, though the majority of these must be labelled propaganda. As American author Steven J. Ross points out, there was an active campaign in the United States from the earliest days of cinema against the positive portrayal of unions and working-class struggle. The conservative forces behind the film conglomerates, supported by government censors and figures such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s J. Edgar Hoover, “never prevented hundreds of films from showing labour organisations as murderous, grafting brutes, while their capitalist opponents embodied all the virtues.” On the other hand, Ross also found that American filmmakers were more concerned with portraying the hardships of working-class life during the silent era than at any other subsequent period in the industry’s history, and the same could be said for Australia. Michael Shull identifies over four hundred films dealing with this subject. Within that group, some one hundred pre–1918 films centred around capital–labor conflicts, with the majority sympathetic to the problems of the working class and condemning greedy
capitalists. The Russian revolution of 1917 put paid to such portrayals, and in the United States an anti-radical sentiment, combined with the post Word War I Red Scare campaign, gave rise to the aforementioned demonisation of the union movement and united labor.

As the Australian cinema industry was, according to one recent commentator, “entirely under Uncle Sam’s grubby thumb” following the formation of the Combine in 1912, the opportunity to see leftist and working-class features locally was thereafter severely diminished. From that time on, Australians mostly saw what the American film industry wanted them to see.

Filmic presentation of working-class issues was also on the agenda of the Communist Party, which formed branches in many western democracies, including Australia, during 1919–20. Slow to manifest, it was not until the early 1930s that Communist Film and Photo League features appeared in the United States and Britain, along with independent newsreel productions by political activists. Unfortunately, Communist Party association with filmmaking and presentation of working-class issues alienated the mainstream studios and limited opportunities for release.

Anti-union attacks occurred in Australian features as well. For example, Ken G. Hall’s Tall Timbers (1937) included an episode where the hero discovers a union man being hired by the villains to disrupt work at the timber mill. The unionist later sabotages the work and endangers the lives of employees.

Despite these forces railing against them, there were opportunities for working-class stories to reach large audiences via the silver screen. The silent era was a time when films could be produced relatively cheaply and profits generated quickly due to the popularity of this new form of mass entertainment. The opportunity arose for organisations, and even local communities, to produce films free of interference and censorship. Such did take place in the United States and, to a much lesser degree, in Australia. For example, in 1927–8 the community of Young in southern New South Wales collaborated with director Phil K. Walsh to produce a 102 minute sprawling historical drama entitled The Birth of White Australia. Presenting a general history of the settlement of Australia by the British, it featured the riots against Chinese gold miners at Lambing Flat near Young in 1861. The film’s anti-Asian stance, promotion of “British White Australia” and failure to acknowledge the rights of local Aborigines mirrored D.W. Griffith’s racist epic, The Birth of a Nation 1915, a film which glorified the Klu Klux Klan, debased black Americans and ignored native Americans.
Evidence of the proliferation of local films in Australia during the silent era is to be found in the fact that during 1911 some 51 feature films averaging between 3–4000 feet in length were produced—a figure not to be bettered until 1975. Some 30 features were also produced in 1912. Unfortunately, the creation of the Combine during that year and an increasing influx of foreign films—mostly from the United States—brought a halt to the large number of Australian productions, as fewer distributors tied up more and more venues. The advent of sound in 1929 further limited the ability to make cheap, truly independent features. Film making and presentation was now more expensive, the major production companies gained greater control over production and distribution, and censorship regimes became centralised and more conservative.\(^{24}\)

In those glory years of the silent era prior to 1913, one film stands out in our search for a feature dealing in substantial part with a modern industrial workplace. It is George Young’s *Strike* of 1912. It is also a film which no longer exists.

**Strike 1912**

Early in January 1912, the Sydney newspaper *Referee* reported that the Australian Film Company had “in active preparation …. the greatest of all Australian moral dramas—*Strike*.” A further report noted that scenes were being shot at a coal mine on the New South Wales south coast.\(^{25}\)

The director of *Strike* was George Young, a retired stage manager from theatre company J.C. Williamson’s and brother of the comic opera star Florence Young. The Australian Film Company, also known as the Australian Film Syndicate, had been formed in 1911 and was based in North Sydney. Alex Hellmrich, a distributor of the time, later recalled that Australian Film Syndicate pictures “were very crude ... and although I was successful in placing them, they had no drawing power, and were turned down by a number of exhibitors on account of their crudeness and unsuitability.”\(^{26}\) George Young is known to have produced a number of films prior to *Strike*, including *The Golden West* (1911), *Three Strikes to Her Bow* (1911), *Gambler’s Gold* (1911) and *The Octoroon* (1912). *Strike* was to be his last feature, and the last known production by the Australian Film Syndicate. Young later appeared as an actor in *The Monk and the Woman* 1917 and had a bit part in Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* 1925.

The scenario for *Strike* was based upon a story by Casper Middleton. The film comprised 6 scenes and ran over 3000 feet
in length, or approximately 50 minutes when shown at the then common projection speed of 16 frames per second. The cast included Middleton and Roland Conway, both of whom had worked on Young’s *Gambler’s Gold.* *Strike* was Roland Conway’s third film. He went on to star in a number of Australian silent features, including *The Woman Suffers* (1918), *Robbery Under Arms* (1920) and *The Romance of Runnibede* (1928).

The story of *Strike* revolved around a villainous foreigner by the name of von Haeke, who charmed Mabel, the daughter of a coal mine owner, in order to gain access to her house and steal money from her father. In the film, von Haeke is about to marry the deluded girl when his deserted wife arrives on the scene and exposes him as a fraud. In revenge, von Haeke induces the coal miners to go on strike. He then forcibly abducts the girl and imprisons her in an old mineshaft. An explosion follows and the mine is flooded. The hero, Jack, arrives in time to save the girl and tackles Von Haeke in a cliff-top struggle. The villain
falls to his death, and Jack and the girl are happily united.\textsuperscript{28} A contemporary newspaper advertisement of the time broke the six scenes down into: (1) In Love with an Adventure, (2) The Marriage Ceremony, (3) In the Bowel’s of the Earth, (4) The Explosion of the Coal Face, (5) The Fight for Life in the Flooded Mine, and (6) The Rugged Cliffs, over the Precipice to Death below.\textsuperscript{29}

With location shooting preferred in Australia during the early silent era, due to the scarcity of indoor studios and small production budgets, the decision to film in the southern coalfields of New South Wales was a logical one. Wollongong was located just 50 miles south of Sydney. Numerous coal mines dotted the side of its steep, forested escarpment. Props in the form of industrial buildings, workers cottages, railways, tramways, and jetties at the nearby harbours were readily available, as were the miners themselves and their families. The mines were relatively accessible and, situated adjacent to the coast, they provided a picturesque industrial landscape. With so much of Australia’s early film focussing on the bush pioneer mythology, \textit{Strike} was an opportunity to present a modern melodrama in a semi-urban, industrial and coastal environment. This was indeed novel, as American director William Worsley observed, because filmmaking in Australia often emphasised “the drama of man’s struggle against nature [i.e. the bush] in the face of great physical and mental hardship, his eventual triumph, and his magnificent reward”.\textsuperscript{30} The turmoil of city and urban working-class life was to a large degree ignored, in favour of countless portrayals of conditions beyond the never never, where sheep, cattle, bushfire and drought were the co-stars.

The people of the Illawarra were quite familiar with cinema by the time George Young and his team visited the region early in 1912. On 10 February 1897 Edison’s Cinematographe was presented in Wollongong, less than five months after moving pictures were first projected to a paying public in Australia at the Melbourne Opera House. In the immediate years following, and throughout the first decade of the 1900s, travelling picture show vendors such as Phelan, Cook, Check and Anderson presented motion pictures in halls up and down the coast.\textsuperscript{31} An undated photograph from the National Film Sound Archive collection shows the Check’s Pictures wagon standing by the side of the northern Illawarra coast road, with Scarborough Hotel in the distance.\textsuperscript{32} During Christmas of 1907 the Tait Brothers brought to Wollongong \textit{The Story of the Kelly Gang}.\textsuperscript{33} In 1911, at the height of the production of local feature films, and as evidence of the increasing popularity of cinema-going amongst the Australian public, the first purpose-built cinemas were erected in
Wollongong—the Garden Picture Palace and the Crown Picture Palace. Some short actuality film had also been made in the Illawarra during this period, including coloured footage taken from an engine during a run from Otford to Scarborough in 1907, and also of the opening of Wollongong Hospital two weeks later. George Young’s movie camera may have been an oddity to the locals when he arrived to film Strike in January 1912, but it was not unknown.

During location shooting Middleton and Conway were the victims of an accident. Whilst struggling on a truck at the mouth of the coal mine tunnel the lashings gave way and both were thrown into a sloping shaft. Fortunately, they escaped with only a severe shaking and were able to return safely to Sydney. Following the completion of outdoor filming, final editing took place at the Australian Film Company’s North Sydney studio. On 17 January it was announced that production would be delayed a few days due to the fact that nitrate film could not be procured until the 20th. This is perhaps evidence of the high demand for local product and the frenetic pace of feature film making in Australia during the boom period of 1911–12. The delay meant that Strike was not completed and ready for distribution until the end of March.

Not much is known about the completed version of Strike apart from a few newspaper notices. No footage of the film has surfaced. Neither is there extant any stills, posters, related ephemera such as a script or theatre program, or copyright material lodged with the relevant authorities. All the negatives for films produced by the Australian Film Syndicate during 1911–12 were purchased by A.C. Tinsdale’s Austral Photoplay Company in 1918 and their fate remains a mystery.

The precise reasons for making Strike are likewise unclear. Young and his team, during this early flowering of independent Australian filmmaking, may have been attempting to reflect the fact that industrial issues figured large amongst the working classes of Australia’s cities and rapidly expanding urban areas. For example, the people of the Illawarra were still recovering from the devastating Mount Kembla mine disaster of 1902 which killed 96 men and boys. Moreover, in January 1912 industrial turmoil was flaring in Brisbane because the tramways company refused to recognise union members’ right to wear union badges. This resulted in a general strike across the city, the first of its kind in Australia. Demonstrators took to the streets, and on 2 February—Black Friday—15,000 were dispersed by mounted police. In such an environment Casper Middleton set his melodrama in the context of a local coal mine and striking workers. Though
this may have been a first for an Australian feature, there was ample precedent abroad for such a film.

As early as 1904, the French had produced a short feature entitled *The Strike*.\(^3^6\) In it several striking workers are killed in a confrontation, and in retaliation the wife of one then kills the factory owner. She is put on trial, but freed when the owner’s son asks for mercy, knowing that his father was wrong in his treatment of the workers. A number of overseas films dealing with industrial issues and strikes began to appear with the new decade. 1910 saw the release of the 10 minute long British newsreel magazine item *A Day in the Life of a Coalminer*. The following year a number of features appeared, including *The Long Strike* and *The Strike at the Mines* in the United States, and *The Strike Leader* in Britain. Later releases included *The Strike* (USA 1914), *The Strike* (Sweden 1914) and *The Strike Breakers* (USA 1919). The British film *The Right to Strike* appeared in 1923, followed by Russian director Sergei M. Eisenstein’s classic *Strike* in 1925, and the German Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* in 1927, with the latter two revealing the suffering and often tragic consequences of industrial disputes.

In addition to above Mammonth Attractions we are
Showing a Special-Added Feature,
AN AUSTRALIAN PRODUCTION
entitled
“STRIKE”
A Romantic Drama of Thrilling and Sensational Scenes,
Suggested by the well-known Author,
CASPER MIDDLETON
This Special Attraction will be shown at Matinees only
from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. for 3 days, viz.
MONDAY, TUESDAY and WEDNESDAY

George Young’s *Strike* premiered at Sydney’s Lyric Theatre on Monday, 1 April 1912. The Lyric, located in the busiest part of Sydney near the Haymarket on George Street, was operated by Canadian J.D. Williams. Along with the adjacent, though more palatial Colonial Theatres, the Lyric formed part of Australia’s first multiplex, running a then novel continuous program from 11am to 11pm.\(^3^7\) William’s price cutting entry fee of 3\(^d\) or 6\(^d\), along with a complete change of program every Monday and Thursday,
and a flood of lights and music on the footpath drawing patrons in, saw his theatres emptying and filling to capacity 12 times a day.

During its brief 3-day Sydney run, Strike was advertised as “a romantic drama of thrilling and sensational scenes suggested by the well-known author Casper Middleton.”38 It ran as a second-string feature at the Lyric, during matinees only. As such it received little notice and no reviews appeared in the major dailies.

During the latter half of May 1912 Strike had a longer and more successful Brisbane showing. Initially due to run at King’s Lyceum over six nights commencing Monday 21 May, Strike was cut back to two due to the early arrival of “another Great Star feature” in the form of the 2000 ft. long American western Monarch of the Prairie.39 The Brisbane notices freely used words such as “thrilling” and “sensational” to describe the film. The Brisbane Courier reviewer reported that Strike was “of exceptional quality” and that the Lyceum’s audience acknowledged it with “enthusiastic applause.”40 The film was then taken up by entrepreneur Hugh Black and run to a large open-air crowd at Brisbane Cricket Ground on Saturday, 25 May, with a programme of American comedic and dramatic shorts and illustrated songs by Taitus George. Black also presented the film at Spring Hill and in repeat sessions.

No further evidence has been found of the wider screening of Strike in the other states, or of a showing in the Illawarra where outside filming had taken place. Whether it dealt in any substantial manner with the circumstances of the coal miners is unclear. It is also unknown whether the film took a pro- or anti-union stance, or was neutral in regards to the industrial turmoil surrounding the strike. We can only guess at the manner in which director George Young portrayed the strike sequences and the use he made of the local mine workers. Eisenstein’s Strike 1925, with its graphic portrayal of the harsh working conditions of Russian foundry workers and the strained living conditions of their families, points to the realities of the time, as do extant photographs and contemporary published accounts of life on the southern coalfields, including newspaper reports and the findings of various commissions of inquiry into mine disasters and industrial accidents.

Reviews would suggest that Strike was primarily a romantic melodrama, though with sensational and exciting scenes centred on the coal mine explosion and flooding, and the cliff-top struggle between the hero and villain. The unionists of Brisbane may have viewed it with distain, in light of their own recent bitter experiences.
Whilst the official newspaper of the Australian Workers Union in Queensland, *The Worker*, contained no reviews of *Strike*, the increasing power of the cinema in forming and swaying public opinion did not go unnoticed. The full-page cartoon frontispiece of its 15 June 1912 edition featured “A Capitalistic Film”, with a projected image of a sinister, cigar-smoking, top-hatted capitalist pointing menacingly out of the screen to the audience below. His message was clear—“Working men. It’s your money we want”, for higher food prices, increased rents and monopolies. No doubt the cartoonist and editors of *The Worker* were wondering where the films were which more accurately and fairly portrayed the often harsh realities of working-class life in Australia. Their viewing of *Strike* during its Brisbane run may have been the spark for such questioning.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of film historian Andrew Pike, film archivist Ray Edmondson, Professor Jim Hagan, Dr. Nancy Huggett and Dr. Joseph Davis in the compilation of this article.

**Notes**


12 The Union Buries its Dead’ is the title of a famous short story by Australian writer Henry Lawson, and supposedly upon which the *Three in One* segment was based.


17 Collins, *op cit.*, p. 68.


25 *Referee*, Sydney, 10 and 17 January 1912.

The length of *Strike* is given as 33 minutes in a number of published listings of Australian film. This, however, is based on the running of the 3000 feet long film at the modern sound standard speed of 24 frames per second. As silent films were usually shot at 16fps, it is more appropriate to give their length according to this rate, rather than the faster 24fps.

A detailed scenario of *Strike* is contained in a review published in *The Brisbane Courier and the Observer* (hereinafter cited *Courier*), 27 May 1912, p. 5.

*Courier*, 18 May 1912, p. 2.


*Check’s Pictures* (photograph), item 353497, National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra. Illustrated Bertrand, *op cit.*, 1989, 53.

*Illawarra Mercury*, 13 and 17 December 1907. *The Story of the Kelly Gang* was presented at Wollongong Town Hall on the evenings of Thursday and Friday, 19 and 20 December 1907. Also shown was footage of the 1907 Melbourne Cup.

*Parkinson, op cit.*

Cooper and Pike, *op cit.*, p. 100.


*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 March 1912; *Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 1912.

*Courier*, 21 May 1912, p. 2.

*Courier*, 22 May 1912, p. 6.