

## **THE MAKING OF *THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET***

**By Andrew Pike and Robin McLachlan**

### **The film's title**

We chose the title *THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET* to indicate how Ben and Elizabeth Chifley always regarded themselves, and were always seen by those who knew them. They were very much identified as members of their home community - the Chifleys who lived on Busby Street, in the working class area of Bathurst. Their modest little house was the home where they lived from the time of their marriage until their deaths. The address sums up the man and his wife, and the title is designed to set the mood and intent of the film.

### **Photographic images and oral traditions**

*THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET* is about the telling of history and the way we remember the past.

Photographic images often help to shape the way we tell our history, the way we remember the past. The photograph of Mrs Petrov losing her shoe at Darwin Airport is a powerful image that has embedded the Petrov affair firmly in popular awareness and popular culture, to an extent that possibly outweighs the actual importance of the event. Prime Ministers since Menzies are well known from television broadcasts, images so often relied upon by documentary filmmakers. But Ben Chifley died before TV had a chance to popularise his image. His face, if remembered at all, is static and posed, and his voice and his mannerisms unknown. Chifley's name is certainly known but there's little public consciousness of the man behind the name, what he represented, what he was really like.

Only a few minutes of moving images survive of Chifley, all of them formal scenes, and most of the thousands of still photographs are formal as well: none of these images really bring the man to life.

In our film, we have used relatively few of these formal images. Instead we have turned to much more eloquent and powerful evocations of the man, as expressed in oral history.

Historians too often place little value on oral evidence, on rumour, gossip, family memories and casual anecdotes. Stories told by the elderly about things that happened in their youth can be factually unreliable, as can these stories when re-told by the descendants of the original teller.

But stories told by the elderly or their families can be invaluable – not for the facts they may or may not contain, but for the spirit and the ideas they can convey. The stories told in our film are often patently at odds with the history books in terms of facts, and few of the stories will ever appear in any published account of Chifley’s life. But the stories tell us how people felt about Ben Chifley and help to bring the man and his times to life, often in a very vivid and emotional way.

These stories can be fragile. Already some of our story-tellers have died, and, if not for our film, their stories would have died with them. Stories in our culture die. Unlike some Indigenous communities, our elder citizens seldom take responsibility for passing on their stories for future generations: such is the low value we place on the oral record, our personal memories of the daily details of our past.

### **Not a political film**

We don’t think of THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET as a partisan political film. It is, we believe, above and beyond party politics. Certainly, we’d like to think that it could have some political effect, in providing a role model for future politicians, but it could have such value for politicians of any party. At the obvious surface level, it is about a politician and his wife, Elizabeth, but more than that it is about the values that Chifley represented – values that he felt were above politics, more important than any individual’s career or the winning of an election.

Chifley’s “Light on the Hill” speeches talk about values that he felt were inviolable. The speeches are often mis-quoted or mis-interpreted. Gough Whitlam publicly acknowledged Chifley as his “mentor” but, in one speech, went on to attribute a meaning to the “Light on the Hill” that was never intended by Chifley – that the phrase represented the task of winning the next election. Chifley’s meaning and intention need to be restored, his ideas re-visited, so that we can learn from his example. His ideals were home-spun, Sunday School moralistic philosophy, and his language suited that purpose, with its ring of pulpit rhetoric, but at least there was a philosophy, simple and crude as it may have been, and it was heart-felt. It was a philosophy that was embedded in every action he took as a politician, and it is worthy of study and debate.

Chifley took what we call “small-town values” to the nation, and to the world – altruistic values of looking after one’s neighbours and caring for those who are “less fortunate” in the community. Our film expresses nostalgia for a time when these were seen as important values. Through our film and the play about Chifley (“The Local Man” by Bob Ellis and Robin McLachlan), Chifley’s values have a chance of reaching new audiences and of being carried forward into the indefinite future.

## **Minimal mediation**

Ideally, “People’s History” allows history to be told by community members in their own words, at their own pace, as experienced, as remembered, as understood, with minimal mediation by pundits and professional historians. The stories tell us what was important to the community and to individuals in that community.

In our film we have attempted to reduce mediation as far as we can. Obviously some intervention has been necessary to clarify opaque statements, to shorten long-winded stories, or to provide context. But we have deliberately avoided reconstructions and “voice of God” narration. Few of the stories in the film are efficient about conveying factual content, and so we had to resort to other devices to convey essential chronological information and context. Sometimes we used extracts from the play about Chifley, “The Local Man”, and we’ve also used intertitles to provide “facts” and to provide a pathway through the maze of stories. The titles, we believe, are less invasive than a more conventional authoritative narration.

We’ve also made minimal use of music. Where possible, the music relates in some way to the stories that are told. Every note of the piano music is derived from the song “Lonely Little Petunia” which is the subject of one of the stories – we’ve changed the key and tempo and have isolated a few clusters of chords from the song. We’ve used this music to try to reinforce the stories, for example, by suggesting the emotional value that is projected on certain inanimate objects in some of the stories, such as “Chif’s Chair” or the dilapidated Railway Institute building where Chifley studied and taught as a young man. The music attempts to evoke the “sacred” nature of the “ordinary” in ways that words alone cannot always do.

In a similar vein, we have involved the local Bathurst concert band in providing music for the film, to enhance the community’s engagement in the making of the film, and because of Ben Chifley’s personal feelings about the band and its music.

We’ve also refrained from using much archival footage or archival photographs, unless those photographs are actually part of a story being told. Where possible, we have photos being held by story-tellers and being talked about by them, rather than using them conventionally as cut-aways or inserts. In general, though with some exceptions, our archival images are not decorative but functional - integrated into the stories by the story-tellers themselves.

Likewise, we’ve avoided interviews with experts and biographers to tell us how to think and feel, how to see and how to understand. The closest we get to authority figures are Sam Malloy (Curator of the Chifley Home Museum) and Dr

Robin McLachlan (co-author of the play about Chifley, “The Local Man”) but they are closely involved in Chifley’s home community in Bathurst and are active participants in recording the “people’s history” as much as they are able to comment objectively upon it.

Where we have made cuts in someone’s story we have tended not to hide the cut with the conventional practice of “cut-aways”: instead we generally use dissolves, jump-cuts or short fade-outs to black to indicate where a cut has been made. Pragmatic concerns have not always made us consistent on this point, but our intention is there – to provide evidence of our intervention.

Rumour and gossip are given equal place in the film, along with established “fact” and information from reliable sources. They are all part of the fabric of “people’s history”. In the main, we don’t “join the dots” for the audience by stating which stories are based on error or faulty memory or untruths. Instead, we’ve concentrated on the emotions and feelings embedded in the stories, in the belief that these carry an ultimate truth, regardless of any inconsistencies in dates or places or sequence of events. We feel strongly that to point out these inconsistencies merely degrades the validity of the emotion being expressed. It is much more important for the emotions to be as direct and as unfiltered as possible.

### **Re-living the moment**

In recording people’s stories, we consciously regarded our work not as interviewing people, but as facilitating them in expressing their memories. We aimed with each story to make the teller feel as safe and as relaxed as possible. Of course we prepared as far as possible for each scene, but lists of questions were rarely consulted; it was much more important for us to “tune in” to the what the story-teller was saying, to follow the flow of feelings being expressed, and to ask questions or make prompts that eased the telling. Being aware of the overall structure of the film, we would often gently steer people in certain directions with their memories or to enhance their story with more detail, but overt direction – asking people to say specific lines for us – was avoided except in a few situations where we felt it was appropriate for the participant.

Our essential aim was to encourage the story-tellers to “re-live” their experiences, rather than simply tell them. Often the telling was a repeat of an oft-told story and it had that air. We aimed to get beyond the familiar phrasing of an anecdote, to encourage the story-teller to go outside their comfort zone, and to re-experience their feelings at the moment they were describing. Once they were “in the zone” of re-living, there was little that we needed to do: the emotion would have its own momentum. We only needed to intervene when the telling reverted to the public voice and intimacy was lost.

## **Determining the sequence**

THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET was a challenge to edit because we had very little linear plot or process to follow. Chifley's own life provided some rudimentary structure – we begin with his childhood and end with his death - but within that framework, we had no specific guidelines to follow. Our intertitles gave us some subject groupings, but within each section, the editing is intuitive and is dictated by what we could call emotional continuity, rather than factual continuity. We also wanted to build a dialogue between the story-tellers, creating resonances or contradictions between various speakers, to enhance the emotional flow or the deeper meaning of each story. Sometimes the power of an individual story came as much from the story-teller as it did from the edited context, sometimes allowing an element of a story to come forward that we were not aware of at the time of filming.

Whether contradiction, emotional resonance or echo , we were building our film from the dynamics of each story and of all the stories when arranged in a sequence.

## **Finding our stories**

We found our 60 or so story-tellers in a variety of ways: usually it was by prior arrangement and by personal referral from Robin McLachlan or Sam Malloy, but sometimes it was by serendipity. Several times, we were filming something in the streets of Bathurst, and passers-by would ask what we were doing; on several occasions, stories arose out of these casual encounters.

One day, we actually went “fishing” for stories. We set up a stall in the monthly Farmers' Market in Bathurst and announced through the local media that we would be there, inviting people to turn up and tell us their stories about Ben and Elizabeth Chifley. Although we did not have high expectations, we were amazed to find a continuous stream of people turning up, and at one stage quite a queue of people waiting to have their story filmed. One elderly gentleman turned up with his walking fame and a bundle of artefacts, saying that he'd caught the bus in from a distant village to see us.

Sometimes the stories were very spontaneous – as in the street or in the Farmers' Market - but many were very studied, using lights and carefully chosen backgrounds. But formal or informal, it was always with the same intent – to engage with the emotion of the moment, and to encourage the story-teller to “re-live” their experience.

*Andrew Pike and Robin McLachlan*