

# Lousy Little Sixpence

A film by Alec Morgan and Gerry Bostock

## PRESS STORIES



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## Forcible removal of children from their parents

One day in 1917, police and officials of the Aborigines Protection Board arrived at Moonachulla reserve. They had orders to remove Margaret Tucker, her sister May, and another girl, from their families.

The Protection Board had, for many years, carried out a policy of forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their communities to work as servants in white homes. Between 1909 and 1930, over one third of Aboriginal children in New South Wales were removed in this way, and over seventy per cent of these were girls. The Board intended that these children would not return home.

The Board's aim was to let only older Aborigines remain on the reserves. Eventually, they would all die and the reserves would be closed; young Aborigines would be absorbed into the lowest class of the white work force.

All over the State, Aboriginal communities lived under the threat of having their children taken from them, particularly those critical of the Board.

In LOUSY LITTLE SIXPENCE, Margaret Tucker recalls the day the police arrived at Moonachulla reserve:

"We were in school when they came. The officials and policemen in the car. The teacher, Mrs Hill, sent two boys over the river to tell my mother. She must have run all the way back from her work because she still had her apron on. She put her arms around the three of us and said, 'You're not taking them.' The policeman patted his case with the handcuffs in it and said, 'Well, I'll have to use this then.' We children thought it was a gun, so we yelled together, 'We'll go, mum, we'll go.' The car took us to Finley, and then on the train to Cootamundra.

I heard years later how my mother cried and cried. She went out into the bush. My old aunt and uncle found her lying under this tree in the tall grass, moaning like an animal; she couldn't cry any more.

I often wonder how many other children were taken like that, just like animals."

The forcible removal of children from their parents has been defined by the United Nations as 'genocide'.

*The Clements family in 1917, shortly before Margaret and May were taken by the Aborigines Protection Board. (Left to right) May, Margaret (upper centre), Evelyn (lower centre), their mother, Geraldine.*



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## Education

During the first half of this century, the education of Aboriginal children was directed towards manual training, the aim of which was to prepare them to become labourers or servants.

While researching for LOUSY LITTLE SIXPENCE, the film-makers came across a song, recalled by Aboriginal elders as being taught to them as youths by missionaries:

“In the house and out the door,  
chopping wood and scrubbing floors,  
washing, ironing, mending too,  
sometimes making Irish stew.  
I’ll do it all for Jesus,  
'cause he’s done so much for me.”

## Child-servants

At the age of twelve, Violet Shea was taken from her mother on Ulgundahi Island reserve and made to work on the mainland for the white manager. She was not allowed to return to the island, and two years later, was sent to Sydney to work in the home of a white middle-class family.

Violet recalled the conditions under which she worked:

“They used to wake me at 5.00 a.m. and I had to do everything. Washing, cooking, ironing, you name it, I did it. And all the time I was with them, I never got paid.

Part of my work was to look after the children. One evening, I was outside when I heard the little boy crying, and his mother just pushed him out the door. He saw me and came running over. I put my arms out and he hugged me around the neck, and he stopped crying.

His mother must have missed him crying and she came out and saw him hugging me. She grabbed the little fellow and sent him away. She turned to me and said, “Don’t you ever put your arms on that boy again.”

I don’t know if she thought the black was going to rub off on the white, but that was what it was like. You don’t show your love or anything. You are just there to do the work as they ordered you to.”



*Aboriginal girl servants often worked seven days a week, and received 1/6 a week pay. One shilling was sent to the Aborigines Protection Board and the girl was to receive 6d a week pocket money. Many never saw that 'lousy little sixpence'.*

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## Aboriginal activism in the 1930s

During the Great Depression, Aborigines began to organise and the first political groups were formed. Perhaps the most important group in New South Wales was the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA), founded in 1937 by Bill Ferguson, an Aboriginal shearer, who had the support of Aboriginal writer and speaker, Jack Patten.

The APA platform was for full citizens rights for Aborigines, and the abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board.

In LOUSY LITTLE SIXPENCE, Bill Reid recalls the days when he travelled with Bill Ferguson all over the State, setting up APA branches:

“I was seventeen when I joined Bill Ferguson. My brother and sister had been stolen away by the Aborigines Protection Board, so I was keen to do something to stop that.

We set off in Bill Ferguson’s old Ford. On the back of the car was a banner which read ‘FULL CITIZENS RIGHTS FOR ABORIGINES’. We were regarded as agitators, and when we pulled up in the towns, the police would come over and check us out.

One of the dangers of being an APA member was to be ‘blackballed’ from your reserve. The white manager had the power to expel any men they regarded as troublemakers. Men who were expelled were not allowed to come within a five mile radius of the reserve, and they were not permitted to take their families with them. These men had to sneak back at night to visit their wives and children. If they were caught, they risked being jailed.

Because of this, we held many of our meetings at night, down by the river or in a lane. By the time the manager found out, we would be gone. Lots of places, the Aboriginal people were all behind Bill. They came out to the meetings and bought membership tickets. Within a few years, there were branches of the APA on most reserves throughout New South Wales.”

In 1941, the New South Wales Government abolished the Aborigines Protection Board, mainly through the work of the Aborigines Progressive Association. It would, however, be another twenty-six years before Aboriginal people won citizenship.



*Jack Patten, President of the Aborigines Progressive Association (left)*

*Bill Ferguson, Founder of the Aborigines Progressive Association.*

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## The Day of Mourning

26 January 1938 - the day white Australians celebrated the 150th anniversary of the landing of the first white settlers in New South Wales. Also on this day, the Aboriginal people held their first national conference and protest, The Day of Mourning.

The conference was organised by the Aborigines Progressive Association, and handbills were sent to Aborigines all over the country urging them to Sydney to support the protest.

While this was being done, the Aborigines Protection Board brought a group of Aboriginal men from a reserve in the west of the State to take part in the re-enactment of the first landing. APA organisers sought out the group to ask them to refuse to take part. After several days, the organisers discovered the men locked up in the Sydney police compound, next to the dog kennels; they had been brought to Sydney under threat of having their rations stopped. An Aborigines Protection Board spokesman was later reported in the *Daily Telegraph* as saying: "We don't want any trouble, we are taking no chances."

The re-enactment of the first landing by white settlers took place before a crowd of thousands, and while these celebrations were taking place, Aboriginal delegates at The Day of Mourning conference stood in protest. At this first Aboriginal conference, a resolution was passed calling for full citizenship rights for Aborigines; Bill Ferguson called for title to freehold land.



AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES CONFERENCE  
Sesqui-Centenary

DAY OF MOURNING & PROTEST

to be held in

THE AUSTRALIAN HALL, SYDNEY  
(No. 148 Elizabeth Street)

on

WEDNESDAY, 26th JANUARY, 1938

(Australia Day)

from

10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTION WILL BE MOVED:

"WE, representing THE ABORIGINES OF AUSTRALIA, assembled in Conference at the Australian Hall, Sydney, on the 26th day of January, 1938, this being the 150th Anniversary of the whitemen's seizure of our country, HEREBY MAKE PROTEST against the callous treatment of our people by the whitemen during the past 150 years, AND WE APPEAL to the Australian Nation of today to make new laws for the education and care of Aborigines, and we ask for a new policy which will raise our people to FULL CITIZEN STATUS and EQUALITY WITHIN THE COMMUNITY."

*Aborigines and Persons of Aboriginal Blood only are invited to attend. Please come if you can!*

Signed for and on behalf of

THE ABORIGINES PROGRESSIVE ASSOCIATION

J. T. Patten, President.

W. Ferguson, Organising Secretary

Address: c/o Box 1924 KK  
General Post Office, Sydney

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## The First Aboriginal Strike

On 6 February 1939, over 200 Aborigines walked off the Cumeroogunga reserve, crossed the Murray River into Victoria, and began the first Aboriginal strike.

In LOUSY LITTLE SIXPENCE, Geraldine Briggs recalls the events leading up to the walkoff:

“By early 1939, the reserve had been under the rule of a white manager named McQuiggen. He’s remembered as a brute by all of us. He would refuse to take the sick to the hospital, and cut off rations to many people. Things got so bad that two babies died in one day. This place was once our home, now it was like a prison camp.

On the first of February, Jack Patten, the president of the Aborigines Progressive Association, arrived at Cumeroogunga. That night he held a meeting in the hall, and when he started to speak, the police arrived and arrested him. They took him away and charged him with inciting Aborigines to riot. All Jack spoke about was our rights, and that we should stand up for them.

The strong one said, “Let’s go”. So we moved over the river. We went over in boats with all our belongings, our beds, clothing, all we owned, and set up camp on the Victorian side of the river. We said we would not move until the manager was removed and conditions improved.

Our family lived in an old tent, but we were determined to live our lives in freedom, for ourselves and our people.”

The strike was supported by Aboriginal organisations and some trade unions, which made it possible for the strikers to see through the winter. At the start of World War Two, however, public support fell away as rumours abounded of Nazi involvement in Aboriginal protest.

## First Mass Strike Of Aborigines

**TREATED LIKE ANIMALS**

**Govt. Tried To Hush Up  
Affair By Arrests**

The first mass strike of Australian aborigines was due to the brutality of officials at Cumeroogunga Mission Station in N.S.W., who treated them like animals.

*Workers' Weekly, 28 February 1939.*



# Weekend Review

## Two approaches to the discovery of hidden history

**I**N the diverse and distinguished field of documentary cinema in Australia, the use of archival footage has become so widespread in recent years that the "compilation film" has virtually become a national genre.

Films like *Frontline*, *Public Enemy Number One*, *Angels Of War* and *First Contact* have done a great deal to popularise the fascination for old footage at a time when documentary films in general are at last beginning to enjoy a degree of theatrical success.

Much of this activity depends on the notion of a lost or hidden history which needs to be rediscovered to support new actions in the present.

To see this as a tradition in Australian documentary films we need only remember that one of the first compilation films — Joan Long's *The Passionate Industry* — was both a history of a forgotten Australian cinema and a manifesto for a new one.

Indeed, the genre perhaps works best when films have a resounding polemical aspect that allows our amazement at the debris of the past to be one element in our pleasure — but not the sole object of the exercise.

For the danger with archival material is not that we might fall into some sinful state of nostalgia, but that they can leave us feeling very smug and secure in our difference from cutely misguided ancestors.

There is quite a bit of cuteness in *For Love Or Money* — a film about the history of women and work in Australia — and none at all in *Lousy Little Sixpence*, an account of the lives of Aboriginal people in NSW from 1900 to 1946.

However these films use quite different methods within the general format of the compilation film, and both emerge as major events in Australian documentary cinema.

Each of them blends a variety of alternately fascinating and horrifying materials into a complex and moving statement, and each controls the passion for the past with an exacting commitment to the present that opens up new grounds for further activity.

### Film

with  
Meaghan  
Morris

#### *Lousy Little Sixpence*

Most capital cities.

Made by Alec Morgan and Gerry Bostock, *Lousy Little Sixpence* is a marvel of economy, delicacy and deftness in producing the maximum effect from carefully selected elements of a long and shameful saga.

The basic framework is provided by a history of one institution, the Aborigines Protection Board, and of those Aboriginal organisations which campaigned against its policies.

This strictly limited focus at once allows the film to develop a clear analysis of the interests at stake in the general treatment of Aborigines during this period, and to move back and forth with the reminiscences of elders living today without dissipating the impact of the main theme.

The film's thesis is that the board's activities over the decades amounted to the administration of a slave labour system.

While waiting for the elders living on reserves to die off, the board set out to destroy the Aboriginal communities by removing the children and sending them to work elsewhere as farm labourers or domestic servants.

These children would never be allowed to return home, and so it was hoped that the reserves would eventually be empty and available for sale as farm land.

Meanwhile the children taken by force from their families were entitled, for their labour, to pocket-money of sixpence a week while a shilling was paid to the board.

But as Violet Shea (taken from Ulgundahi Island at the age of 12) recalls in the film, many of the child-workers never saw their sixpence — and they knew that it would have been considered the height of bad manners to ask.

This story is extraordinary in itself, and one of the most impressive achievements of *Lousy Little Sixpence* is the remarkable — and effective — restraint and humour with which it is told.

Witnesses like Margaret Tucker, Bill Reid, Flo Caldwell and Geraldine Briggs often tell their tales in the style of an amusing anecdote — with the result that the substance seems all the more shocking for the dignity of the narration.

When moments of pain do occur on screen, however, there is none of the lingering camera-work (found in verité films like *Tattooed Tears*, for example) that allows the audience the luxury of a voyeuristic wallow in other people's distress.

The same discretion has been exercised in the selection and editing in of choice pieces of old newsreel footage.

Among these there are two — one clinically comparing Aboriginal children to ants, and another revealing that Nazis are behind Aboriginal protest movements — that suffice to suggest the outlines of a whole history of racist representation.

But the most exciting aspect of *Lousy Little Sixpence* is perhaps the way that the history of the board is used in turn as a basis for beginning a history of Aboriginal resistance, Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal politics.

Instead of simply denouncing a board defunct since 1941, the film also introduces us to the work of William Cooper of the Australian Aborigines League, Jack Patten and Bill Ferguson of the Aborigines Progressive Association, and the events of the Cumerogunga Reserve strike in 1939.

That the record of Aboriginal activism in the 1930s is not part of our common familiar history today is very much a problem of the present — and one that *Lousy Little Sixpence* addresses with resounding success.

# Lousy Little Sixpence

## MEDIA INFORMATION



### Lousy Little Sixpence

In Australia in 1909, in the State of New South Wales, the Aborigines Protection Board planned to break up Aboriginal communities by forcibly removing their children and hiring them out as servants to white employers.

The title of this powerful documentary comes from the wages that were to be paid to the children. Many never saw 'that lousy little sixpence'.

In the mid-1930s, the Aboriginal people began to organise and to fight the Aborigines Protection Board.

Through old newsreels, archive film, photographs and interviews with five Aboriginal Elders who lived through those hard times, the film weaves a moving account of their lives.

### Film Outline

Between 1909-1930, over one-third of Aboriginal children in New South Wales were taken from their families by the Aborigines Protection Board. Police were often used to carry out this terrible act.

Nearly seventy per cent of children taken were girls. They were sent to training homes to be trained as domestic servants before being sent out to work in the homes of middle-class whites.

The children were made to work long, hard hours for little or no pay. Many of the girls were molested or raped by their "masters". Some escaped and made it home where the managers had the power to force them into marriage.

The second part of the film traces the development of the Aborigines political organisations in the 1930s. With no money and little support they were able to organise the Aboriginal people in New South Wales to fight the Aborigines Protection Board.

With a platform of Citizen Rights, and the abolition of the Aborigines Protection Board, the organisers used every possible means to make White Australia aware of their struggle — public meetings, protest rallies, newspaper articles and film.

On January 26 1938, the first national Aboriginal protest was held in Sydney — "The Day of Mourning".

Early in February 1939, the Aboriginal people of Cumeroogunga Reserve crossed the river into Victoria and began the first Aboriginal strike.

In 1941 the New South Wales Government was forced to abolish the Protection Board. However, Aboriginal soldiers returned from World War II to a country where they were not even citizens. The struggle goes on.

### Why the Film was Made:

Open any volume of Australian history and try to find any reference to William Cooper, Bill Ferguson and the Cumeroogunga strike. Most likely you will find nothing at all.

The same is true about Australian film, music, social and political history. For many years most historians and anthropologists have ignored the lives of the Aboriginal people who lived in the southern states during the years 1909-1946.

It was in those years that a New South Wales government department carried out a policy of genocide and slavery of the Aboriginal people. In those years the first Aboriginal political manifesto was written, the first Aboriginal organisations were set up and the first Aboriginal strike took place.

In the cities of the south, Aboriginal organisers made white Australians aware that they were a people determined to survive and win. After years of struggle, they defeated the Aborigines Protection Board's plan to break up the Aboriginal communities. None of this was achieved without many casualties. Thousands of Aboriginal children were stolen from their families before the Protection Board could be stopped.

Even today, the residue of the Aborigines Protection Board's policies influence welfare thinking. These need to be removed forever. It was for these reasons that we made *Lousy Little Sixpence*. We wanted to make a film that would fill the dangerous vacuum in Australian history, and give to future generations more information than we grew up with.

Raising the finance to make this film was a long struggle. It is hard to forget those dark, sad days when we would receive word that a person, whom we wanted to record on film, had passed away. We hope this film is just the start and that it has forced a wedge in the door of history that was about to close forever.



# Lousy Little Sixpence



## How the Film was Made:

"My mother must have run all the way from her work because she still had her apron on. She put her arms around the three of us and said: "You're not taking them." The policeman patted his case with the handcuffs in it and said, "Well, I'll have to use this then." We children thought it was a gun, so we yelled together, "We'll go Mum, we'll go."

We didn't want him to hurt our mother.

(Margaret Tucker)

Sixty-three years later, a small film crew recorded Margaret Tucker's recollection of that terrible day in 1917 when the Aborigines Protection Board took her from her mother. The filming took place on a cold morning in Margaret's tiny Melbourne flat. The film-makers had only a few rolls of film and sound tapes, but it was the start of a film journey that would last two-and-a-half years.

Over those years, the film-makers and the people appearing in the film became close friends. Many days and evenings were spent together recording this incredible history. We were determined that it should be made known to the world. When we were able to raise some finances, we filmed interviews and continued our research.

The making of *Lousy Little Sixpence* was like a detective story. Much of the visual evidence we needed to make the film had been destroyed or was missing. We had to find it. We followed every clue, no matter how fragmented or small.

Little remained of film footage that shows the lives of the Aboriginal people who lived in NSW during the first half of this century. Most of the Aboriginal people who lived through those years have now passed away.

The history was in danger of being lost forever.

We spent months looking at old film footage. Thousands and thousands of feet of film were examined and recorded. A lot of time was spent in dark archives and libraries searching through photo collections and reports and newspapers.

While this was going on, we had to find the money to keep the film going. We often borrowed or begged a few dollars from friends. After twelve months we were able to raise private investment and an investment from the Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission.

Without their timely help, this film would not have been made.

This film is a compilation of those years of searching and collecting. It is made up of memories, photos, film footage, newsreels, cartoons, reports and music of the years 1900-1946.

During the hardest times in making this film, the inspiration of the Aboriginal people who struggled during those difficult years kept us going. Their courage and strength is what allowed us to go on and to finish the film. It is to them we dedicate the film.



*NSW Blanket Day: Blankets being handed out to Aboriginal people in NSW by the police. These were given only as a loan and remained the property of the NSW government. Stamped over the blankets in large letters were the words 'New South Wales Aborigines'. It was illegal for Aborigines to sell the blankets. (Kerry and King photograph 1900s).*

# Lousy Little Sixpence



## **People Appearing in the Film:**

### **Margaret Tucker:**

Although Margaret is now in her late seventies, she still takes an active interest in Aboriginal affairs. At the age of thirteen she was snatched from her mother and sent hundreds of miles away to Sydney to work as a servant.

She ran away many times and eventually made her way to Melbourne. In the early 1930s, she became a founding member of the Australian Aborigines League.

She began an active life campaigning for citizen rights for her people. In 1939 she organised concert parties to raise funds for Cumeroogunga strikers. Because of her activism she was named "the black communist".

Her experiences and philosophy on life is to be read in her autobiography *If Everyone Cared*.

### **Geraldine Briggs:**

Only moments before the police arrived to take Geraldine from her mother, an uncle bundled her into a buggy and drove her to another reserve. Geraldine was only five years old at the time.

It was on the same day that her elder sister, Margaret Tucker, was taken away by the Aborigines Protection Board. They did not see each other for many years.

For most of her life, Geraldine has been actively involved in working for Aboriginal organisations. Today she is helping to establish a school for Aboriginal children in Melbourne.

She is deeply concerned that her history is passed on to the younger generation.

Her daughter, Hyllus Maris, is the writer of the award-winning television series *Women of the Sun*.

### **Bill Reid:**

Bill has lived most of his life in the north-west of NSW. His brother and sister were taken away by the Aborigines Protection Board when he was very small.

At the age of seventeen, he joined Bill Ferguson in organising Aborigines on reserves throughout the state. He was elected secretary of the Aborigines Progressive Association in 1941. Later, he gained world-wide recognition for his beautiful emu-egg carvings.

He now lives in Tamworth and is completing his autobiography.

### **Flo Caldwell:**

Flo grew up on Ulgandahi Island reserve on the north coast of NSW. She had vivid memories of the hard times on the island under the white manager's rule. She was taken away from her family and sent out to become a servant. Later she returned to the island and raised a family. Over the years, she managed to keep her children from the clutches of the Aborigines Protection Board. She now lives in Sydney and takes an active interest in Aboriginal affairs.

### **Violet Shea:**

Violet wanted to be in the film because she had told her life story to many people and felt that no one really believed such things went on.

Violet grew up on Ulgandahi Island where she was a close friend of Flo Caldwell. She too, was taken away to Sydney to work as a servant until she was nineteen years old. She managed to escape the Protection Board's rule by living in Sydney and during the 1930s supported the Aborigines Progressive Association organisers by giving their families a bed for the night.

# Lousy Little Sixpence



## The Film Crew

Producer and Director	Alec Morgan	Sound	Lawrie Fitzgerald John Whitteron
Co-producer	Gerald Bostock	Editors	John Scott Ronda MacGregor
Associate producer	Lester Bostock	Editing Assistant	Frans Vandenburg
Narrator	Chicka Dixon	Sound Editor	Roy Mason
Cinematography	Martha Ansara	Music Director	Ralph Schneider
Additional cinematography	James Grant Fabio Cavadini	Research	Alec Morgan Gerald Bostock

THIS FILM WAS PRODUCED WITH ASSISTANCE FROM THE CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT BRANCH OF THE AUSTRALIAN FILM COMMISSION, THE ABORIGINAL ARTS BOARD, THE DEPARTMENT OF ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS, THE WOMEN AND LABOR CONFERENCE TRUST FUND, PUBLIC DONATIONS, AND THE SUPPORT OF COUNTLESS FRIENDS.

For further information please contact:

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Chippendale, Sydney, NSW 2008  
Phone: (02) 698 8115.

or the Australian distributor:

Ronin Films,  
136 Blamey Crescent,  
Campbell, A.C.T. 2601  
Phone Canberra (062) 48 0851

## Film Crew Details:

### Alec Morgan — Producer and Director

Directed and produced the award-winning short *Robin Campbell – Old Fella Now* and was a co-producer of *Essie Coffey's My Survival as an Aboriginal*. He has worked on a number of documentary and feature films, including *Wrong Side of the Road*.

### Gerald Bostock — Co-Producer and Assistant Director

He is a well-known Aboriginal playwright and poet. His first play *Here Comes the Nigger* was performed at the Black Theatre in Sydney. He was an assistant director on John Duigan's feature film *Far East* and has completed a script for a four-part television series on the Aboriginal resistance movement.

### Lester Bostock — Associate Producer

In the late 1960s he was a member of the Aborigines Progressive Association.

He was a founding director of the National Black Theatre in Redfern and a director of Tranby Aboriginal co-operative college.

Today he is the National Chairman of the National Aboriginal and Islanders Broadcasting Association and the producer of Aboriginal radio for 2EA.

### Chicka Dixon — Narrator

He has been working for Aboriginal organisations for over thirty years. He was a member of the Aborigines Progressive Association in the 1950s and fought actively for Citizen Rights in the 1960s. He headed the first Aboriginal delegation to China in 1972. He is now the senior liaison officer for the Aboriginal Hostels Ltd.

### John Scott — Editor

One of Australia's top film editors. He is best known for his work on the award-winning feature films, *Newsfront*, *Heatwave* and *The Wrong Side of the Road*. His enormous experience contributed greatly to the making of *Lousy Little Sixpence*.

### Martha Ansara — Cinematographer

She is the producer and cinematographer for countless Australian independent films. Her work includes *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, and her most recent film is *Changing the Needle*, a documentary on drug rehabilitation in Vietnam. She is now working for the Australian Peace movement.