

# BACKS TO THE BLAST

Harry Bardwell is an Adelaide filmmaker who has recently sold his independently produced documentary *Backs to the Blast* to Channel 7, something of a breakthrough for filmmakers of this type of film. Here he talks about the making of the film with Glenys Rowe.

When did you get interested in Maralinga as the subject for a film?

In 1979 I was working at the SA Media Resource Centre when some environmentalists rang up requesting information about making a videotape about the old yellow cake plant and tailings dam in the Port Pirie town. I gave them some budgeting estimates and so on but the project never got off the ground. Later that year, after the Dunstan Government fell, there was a lot of optimistic press about the chance for uranium mining to go ahead now the Liberals were in, with very little critique. So I thought I would check out the situation in Port Pirie. When I went up there I thought, where did the uranium come from?, and realised there were these old uranium mines in South Australia that I had heard nothing about and knew nothing about, at Radium Hill and Mt Painter.

So I tried to see them. The first time we tried to get to Radium Hill we had to turn back because there were no public roads. We had to get to know the station owners. Realising a mining town of two thousand people had been out in the desert sparked off the idea that here was an ideal case study for the longer term effects of a nuclear program on a wide range of the population.

And where did Maralinga come in?

Maralinga was the logical extension, the end result of the uranium which was dug out of those mines and processed at Port Pirie. It draws attention to the whole process. The general public is not particularly interested in watching a film about uranium mining but they will if there is an atomic bomb in it.

It's obviously been made for television. The structure, the presentation with an on camera authority commenting on various phases of it, govern the style. So, in terms of content, what sort of decisions did you make when structuring it for television?

We decided to structure it for commercial television quite early. When you talk to people about nuclear issues, there are a few who know quite a bit about it, and they have very defined ideas, either pro or anti, and there doesn't seem to be much point in making films for them. I wanted to aim for the middle ground. Most people are confused and apprehensive about the nuclear question so we structured the film for those people.



Every person speaking in the film represents a different segment of the broader society. When an industry like this goes ahead it incorporates people from all walks of life, not just miners, but mining communities, transport workers, administrators, fabricators, scientists. Eventually it flows through the whole community and everyone watching the film should be able to relate to at least one character in the film.

Those people in the film are now sick and dying.

It takes fifteen to twenty years before the effects of radiation become fully apparent. I selected this particular case study to show what happened when Australia enthusiastically supplied uranium to its allies and made some quick profits, which is loosely paralleled with what is happening today. Although it is much bigger today.

Did you have trouble getting people to talk about it?

The main difficulty was in finding the right people — people who were directly involved, who had credible stories and who had been affected, but once I found them they were generally happy to talk. Because they had been directly affected

by their contact with radiation they were quite willing to speak, and some had already spoken to the press, regardless of their overall political stance.

Your concentration on the health of the workers is remarkably restrained, given the sensationalist potential of the material. What decisions did you make in regard to the personal histories of the workers involved?

I wanted it to be fairly strong but not be dismissed as pure emotionalism. I thought it would have more long term impact if it was normal people speaking, everyday people telling their story rather than superficial sensationalism. If you look at a normal current affairs program these people don't say very much, they are just padding. George Negus or whoever it is does all the talking and they just say a few words. Here they each tell a story of something they were involved in which they didn't understand, and in each case something went wrong, and they got sick, because the safeguards were inadequate or unrealistic.

Perhaps we shouldn't trivialise matters by using phrases like "getting sick". What these people actually suffer from is cancer, isn't it?

They have a whole range of diseases depending on the exposure they received — including lung diseases, skin problems, genetic problems and nervous problems as well as cancer.

Has there been any government research done on these effects?

There have been no comprehensive studies. There have been some reports on each place but they have been kept quiet and are really hard to get hold of. Whenever the government is questioned they say that there is no cause for alarm, yet when you sit down and look at the empirical evidence it tells a different story. In Port Pirie where people have been living for years within fifty yards of radioactive tailings, giving off radon gas at a rate about 70 times greater than the tolerable US standard.

Is it obvious when you walk around Port Pirie that this situation has given rise to a particularly poor level of health?

No. Port Pirie has the largest lead smelter in the southern hemisphere. It smelts all the lead from Broken Hill, so the standard of health there is very low, anyway. It has been going for one hundred years or so, it's a very tight company town. So when I went round talking about the health hazards from low level radiation the general response was – well, everyone has diseases here because the air is so full of lead.

What diseases are they?

Pulmonary, lung disease, heart disease, genetic malformity, a general shortening of life.

When you were researching the film you covered a lot of sensitive areas, Government ones as well as private industry. How did you find that? How did you represent yourself?

I've had a fair amount of experience doing script research for other films. I've been writing documentary scripts for the SA Film Corporation for quite a few years now, and before that I worked in television newsrooms, so I'm reasonably adept at finding information.

Did you find the subject matter made people clam up?

It varied. A lot of the workers had signed oaths of secrecy so they were pretty wary to start with. They had had to sign the Secrecy Act. At the time of signing the Government checked out the whole family of the worker, particularly at Maralinga – the equivalent of working at Pine Gap today. These people were working on top secret weapons development in the mid fifties. The Korean War had just ended. The Cold War era.

But once you broke the ice and got to talking and got them thinking about a job they were doing twenty years ago, they were pretty articulate.

How did you go about dealing with Government departments? Was gaining access to Maralinga difficult, for example? That was hard. They didn't really want us up there with a camera, even today. But

they had little choice because the village area was declassified a few years ago and they cannot legally stop you from going.

Who did you approach?

I knew a couple of people who had been up there before and they put me onto the weapons research establishment. After speaking to a couple of people there I was passed onto some top army bureaucrat in Canberra who passed me across to the Secretary of National Development and Energy and so on and so on until we eventually got permission to go, from Senator Carrick I think, provided we flew in, at our own cost, a member of the Atomic Energy Commission and the top man from the Department of National Development. This meant taking an extra plane which was taxing on the budget to say the least.

Everywhere we went up there we were closely accompanied by four Commonwealth cops and these two bureaucrats. They always stood about thirty yards away, out of camera shot, listening to what we were saying.

That must have been trying . . .

It was. All we wanted was to get in and out of there as fast as possible. I was suffering from flu – sick as a dog, flying around in unpressurised planes, suffering from terrible earache and blowing my nose all the time. One time I dropped a kleenex, while talking about the next shot or something, and buried it with my boot. When I got back in the landrover the cop wanted to know what it was that I'd buried. We weren't allowed to take stills up there.

What does Maralinga look like now? Can you get onto it if you want to?

I wouldn't suggest anyone try. The British spent one hundred million pounds up there during the 1950s which was a lot of money then and still is, but there's not much there now. It's all been pulled down.

Who lives there? and how do they feel about it?

There are Commonwealth police stationed there. I think they keep away from the radiation areas. One of them wanted Rob Robotham to run the geiger counter over

his land rover to check if he'd picked anything up . . .

Is there much waste still there?

It's hard to say. The place has been cleaned up several times since 1960 and the areas of high radiation fenced off. But a lot of stuff, steel containers, fragments, old hot equipment, is still there. It's not chemically treated, they just got a bulldozer and dug a trench and buried it. The government is adamant that it is safe, but judging by their reactions, I think there might be more to it.

What were their reactions to what you were doing?

It was pretty strange really. I was talking to the guy from the Department of National Development, who I suppose is the chief man in the bureaucracy for pushing uranium, and he said "yes I was in the CND marches in London in 1957" – trying to justify himself.

He'd been a disbeliever but now he'd seen the light . . . ?

Yeah, he'd seen the light all right, \$50 000 per year, worth of light I'd reckon.

In the film there is some stunning archival footage, including a piece with the bomb going off, and I believe that is where you got the title from, where about a hundred men standing with their backs to the bomb and their hands over their eyes and looks as though you can actually see right through them when the bomb goes off. The light is so intense. Where did you find the archival footage?

The footage in the film came from all over the place, mainly libraries, and it ranged from standard 8 to 35 mm cinesound. The cinesound footage has been used several times on television but a lot of it like *The Mount Painter Adventure* which was made by the SA Government Tourist Bureau in 1947 about uranium mining in the Flinders Ranges, hadn't seen the light of day for many years.

What are your plans for the film now?

It's just been sold to Channel 7 for network release and it's been screening at the Dendy, Martin Place at lunch time. After that I am hoping to sell it abroad. I've spent two years out of my life making this film and I want it seen.