

The Back of Beyond

Directed by	John Heyer
Produced by	John Heyer
Written by	John Heyer Janet Heyer Douglas Stewart
Narrated by	Kevin Brennan
Starring	Tom Kruse William Henry Butler Jack the Dogger Old Joe the Rainmaker the Oldfields of Etadunna Bejah Malcolm Arkaringa the people of the Birdsville Track
Music by	Sydney John Kay
Cinematography	Ross Wood
Editing by	John Heyer
Distributed by	Shell Film Unit
Release date(s)	1954
Running time	66 minutes
Country	Australia
Language	English
Budget	£12,000 (estimated)

The Back of Beyond (1954) is a feature-length award-winning Australian documentary film produced and directed by John Heyer for the Shell Film Unit. In terms of breadth of distribution, awards garnered, and critical response, it is Heyer's most successful film. It is also, arguably, Australia's most successful documentary: in 2006 it was included in a book titled *100 Greatest Films of Australian Cinema*, with Bill Caske writing that it is "perhaps our [Australia's] national cinema's most well known best kept secret".^[1]

The aim of the film, as requested by the Shell Company, was to associate Shell with the essence of Australia, with Australianism.^[2] Heyer took as his central motif the fortnightly journey made by mailman Tom Kruse, along the remote Birdsville Track from Marree, in South Australia, to Birdsville, in southwest Queensland. In 1957, Heyer wrote that this film, when viewed with Francis Birtles' earlier *In the Track of Burke and Wills* (1916), "clearly suggest[s] that the true image of Australia is, and always has been, the image of Man against Nature".

The film brought Tom Kruse to public notice, and resulted in his being appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) on 1 January 1955.

Production

The film took 3 years to make: one year of thinking and planning, one year of production, and one year to edit and finish it. The film was scripted in advance, though changes were made during filming and production. Of the three years, only six weeks were spent shooting on location.

Heyer prepared the shooting script after undertaking a research trip with Tom Kruse, and location shooting began in late 1952. The film was edited by Heyer in Sydney at Mervyn Murphy's Supreme Sound studio.

Conditions for the location shoot were harsh with both the terrain and the weather creating difficulties for the crew. Sand, in particular, created havoc with the equipment. Audiotapes of the soundtrack recorded on location could not be used due to sand damage, and the whole film had to be re-voiced in post-production. While it was common to post-sync dialogue and sound effects in documentaries at this time, Kruse and other participants in the film expected to hear their own voices up on screen and some of them were reportedly shocked to hear another person's accent coming out of their own mouths.

Ed Note: *Dr. Elizabeth Heyer, daughter of the director John Heyer has very clear childhood memories of recording audio post-production for the camel wagon scene shot in Marree. She told Ian Doyle in an interview in 2011 that Heyer family kitchen utensils, including pots and pans were clanged and banged and recorded in their kitchen in Sydney and the sounds were used in the film. She and her sister were also recorded in the back yard of their suburban Sydney home yelling cooee cooee, to post-sync the voices of the two young girls who got lost and perished in the desert. She remembers having to do it many many times.*

Themes

The film reconfirms settler anxieties about the outback as a place of isolation, brutal indifference, danger and timelessness but at the same time presents the characters in the landscape as survivors, people who endure, battlers with hearts of gold.

Style

John Heyer and his cinematographer Ross Wood had both worked for the Commonwealth Film Unit prior to joining Shell. Wood's accomplished visual style and Heyer's grasp of film language combine in the film to create some of the most iconic images of the Australian outback filmed in this period.

Ed Note: *Dr. Elizabeth Heyer 2011 interview. John Heyer's wife Janet was the peacemaker on location. John Heyer was focused on directing the film and from time to time, Janet's negotiation and people skills resolved potential difficulties. Janet Heyer also made a cameo appeared in the film as the dead mother at the homestead, at the start of the lost girls story. Valma Kruse was asked to play the role however politely declined the opportunity.*

The young girls leaving the homestead with the billy cart, pet dog, tin whistle and flagon of water are Tom and Valma's daughters, Helen and Pauline Kruse. Most of the 'lost girls' sand hill sequences shot on the Birdsville Track were unusable. Heyer had to reshoot the sequences with two other young girls when he returned to Sydney. The dresses worn by Helen and Pauline were made by Valma Kruse. They were sent to Sydney and the sequences were shot in beach sand hills south of the city and the Kurnell Refinery. Heyer was concerned about the 'clouds' on the horizon as the girls puled the billy cart across the sand hills. The clouds are smoke from the refinery.

It is generally accepted that *The Back of Beyond* belongs broadly to the British Documentary movement, and is also seen as being part of a landscape documentary tradition that can be found in the works of Robert Flaherty and Harry Watt. It is best regarded, however, for the lyrical and poetic quality it brings to these traditions. The poetic quality is enhanced by his using the poet, Douglas Stewart, on the script later in the production phase. In 1955, Stewart published a book of poems titled *The Birdsville Track* drawing from his work on the film's script.

Ed Note: *Dr. Elizabeth Heyer 2011 interview. Renowned Australian painter Sidney Nolan and his wife Cynthia were family friends of John and Janet in Sydney. Indeed Sidney deputized for John Heyer and accepted the film's most significant award, the 1954 Venice Biennale Grand Prix Assoluto in Venice.*

Sidney Nolan also accompanied John Heyer on a film research trip along the Birdsville Track in 1951. The trip had a profound influence on Nolan. The animal carcasses strewn across in the landscape – on the open plain or lodged in trees at the flood level intrigued him.

"..the landscape presents scenes of desolation which mark the memory of all who see it. Thousands of carcasses are strewn on the baked and cracked plains. There is a brooding air of almost Biblical intensity over millions of acres which bear no trace of surface waters. The dry astringent air extracts every drop of moisture from the grass, leaving it so brittle that it breaks under foot with the tinkling of thin glass."

Sidney Nolan. Epic Drought in Australia 1952

Nolan took a series of photographs on the trip in 1951. These black and white pictures and the landscapes he painted, based on the images that featured animal carcasses in various precarious and unnatural positions became known as his Carcass Series. Some suggest that Nolan 'manufactured' some of the photographs by placing the carcasses in unusual places for dramatic effect. Whatever the truth, the photographic and painting series has become one of Nolan's most recognizable and successful.

While the film is highly praised and granted 'classic' status, some critics question specific aspects, most commonly the 'Lost Children' sequence. Some argue that that it breaks the narrative flow, while others insist that it works well.

Ed Note: *Things you might not know about The Back of Beyond.*

- 1. The 'Lost Children' sequence was based on an incident in the backcountry of western NSW - not the Birdsville Track.*
- 2. Animals (dingoes) and some birds (swans) were filmed in Taronga Zoo in Sydney. It was far too difficult to shoot close-up live animal sequences on location with the very cumbersome 1950s film equipment.*
- 3. The sand storm in the Cooper sequence was generated with a motor driven aircraft propeller. Some of the images are of a real Birdsville Track storm. It's possible that the real storms caused the damage to the sound and some of the images recorded when filming of the production.*
- 4. The water in the flat-sided water bucket used in the Crossing the Cooper sequence on the MV Tom Brennan was to prevent the outboard engine from overheating. The flat-sided bucket was designed to assist it to hang well against the side of the travelling mail truck.*
- 5. The camera and camera mount can be seen as a shadow on the side of the truck in the point-of-view camera shot when the mail truck descends the big sand hill.*
- 6. The birds of prey in the opening are stuffed are wired to sticks and manipulated by hand in front of the camera lens.*
- 7. The post-production sound used for the Camel Wagon sequence at Marree was produced in the Heyer family kitchen in Sydney using kitchen utensils and pans.*
- 8. Two young boys participated in the Ride to the Gate sequence in Marree. They jumped on the back of the truck and waved Tom goodbye at the fence on the edge of the town common. One lad became a SA Policeman and was killed in Crete and the other is the recent Marree dog fence rider and Quorn based whip maker David Coverdale.*

Release and distribution

The film, released only in 16mm format, premiered in Adelaide, South Australia, on 5 May 1954, at a charity event to aid the Crippled Children's Association. Its public premiere was at the inaugural Sydney Film Festival in June 1954 and it was shown widely in Australia, including throughout the outback.

It premiered in Tom & Valma's hometown Marree on Saturday July 24th 1954. *The Back of Beyond Collection* was released 50 years to the day in 2004. One thousand people were in Marree for the event. The Canberra premiere was held at the Albert Hall on 8 July 1954. Amongst the audience of 300 were many diplomats, including those from the United States of America, Japan, China and Ceylon.

In the first year of its release in Australia, due largely to Shell's extensive distribution and exhibition network, over 750,000 people saw it. Australia's population was 8.9 million people. It was also televised extensively overseas, and represented Australia at several film festivals.

Reception

The film was well received by critics and the public alike. Professor Stout, in an ABC radio broadcast on 1 May 1954 said, prophetically, "I believe this film will become a classic. It is poetic, imaginative and yet tough at the same time. There is humor in it, unforced and natural ... John Heyer's *The Back of Beyond* is a landmark in Australian documentary. It will cause a sensation in Britain".

Other reviews of the time include:

- "The final effect is a wholly convincing search for truth and much skill in presenting it ... A vividly fascinating film which sheds a forbidding light on Australian realities and darkens one's suspicions of the universe ... Documentary film has rarely been less self-conscious or more enthralling." (from *The Listener*, 3 June 1954)
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- "A small audience sitting in a private cinema off the Strand today saw what must rank as one of the most remarkable documentaries ever made." (from *The Manchester Guardian*, 19 February 1954)
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- "... a landscape where man is always solitary, always on the defensive against Nature; once more, the Shell film-makers revive faith in documentary." (from Dilys Powell in *Sunday Times*, 21 February 1954)
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- "... is bound to rank as an Australian masterpiece ... the message of the film is by no means one of unrelieved horror and pessimism. There is much hopefulness in the unaffected courage and the humor it finds among the people who live along the Birdsville Track." (from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 1954)
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- "... is significant on account of the perfect blending of sound, words and images ... The images of the other films shown at the Festival are as static as picture postcards and certainly don't possess the suggestive powers of John Heyer's film." (from *Uomini E Film*, Venice, Volume 4-5 August 1954)

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- "... has become acknowledged throughout the world as an outstanding documentary film." (from Charles Chauvel in *Walkabout*, 1959)

In addition to its being regularly discussed in academic circles and frequent retrospective screenings, evidence of its ongoing longevity as a significant film include:

- its listing in 2006 in Hocking's *100 Greatest Films of Australian Cinema*

Awards

- 1954 Venice Biennale: Grand Prix Assoluto
- 1954 Edinburgh International Film Festival: Diploma
- 1955 Cape Town Film Festival: Diploma
- 1956 Montevideo Film Festival: 1st Prize
- 1956 Johannesburg Film Festival: Diploma
- 1956 Trento Film Festival: Diploma

Edited by

Ian Doyle
Executive Producer
The Back of Beyond Collection

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