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The silent work of Australian women scenario writers

Abstract

Set against a backdrop of the boom and bust of Australian silent film production, World War 1 and the first wave of feminism that provided role models for spirited young women, this chapter will explore the lives and scenario writing work of Lottie Lyell, the McDonagh sisters and to a lesser extent Agnes Gavin and Louise Lovely. Through a study of some of the surviving original scenarios, it will also examine the form the early scenarios took before the talkies transformed writing for the screen into what we know today as the screenplay.

Key words

Silent film scenarios, Australia, Lottie Lyell, The McDonagh sisters, Louise Lovely, Agnes Gavin

Introduction

The early days of silent cinema in Australia were extraordinary. Over two hundred narrative films were produced in Australia before the advent of the talkies in 1928. This included what is believed to be the first long-form dramatic film the world, *The Story of The Kelly Gang* (1906). ¹Australians were passionate about the cinema and audiences flocked to screenings in makeshift tents, community halls and the many picture theatres

that were quickly built in cities and country towns. Showmen travelled to remote areas by horse and cart, screening films, often in the open air. With small portable cameras, dramatic locations, and a hungry cinema-going public, it was a time when anyone could have a go, and they did. The new medium attracted storytellers from theatre and vaudeville as well as a new generation of both men and women keen to try their hand. There was money to be made and audiences were keen to see Australian stories. In 1907 the Harvester Judgement ruled that the male basic wage should include the price of a ticket to the pictures for a man his wife and two children. While this did not include the many single mothers and widows who were sole breadwinners, it is indicative of the popularity of the cinema and its place in the life of every-day Australians.

During this time a number of remarkable women rose to prominence as writers and directors. This chapter will focus on the early scenario writing work of some of them, in particular Lottie Lyell and the McDonagh sisters. Lyell was a much-loved silent screen star, but her work as a scenario writer and script collaborator with director Raymond Longford is less well known. Of the twenty-eight films they made together Lyell holds scenario-writing credits on twelve, but it is now generally accepted that she contributed much more to the writing and the directing of all the films than was ever officially acknowledged. (Pike & Cooper 1998: 19, 109) (Dooley 2000:4) The McDonagh sisters, Paulette, Isobel and Phyllis worked collaboratively making four feature films and a number of short documentaries. Paulette is credited as the writer and director, yet years later she was furious when a television program claimed she was the author of the films. She rang archivist, Graham Shirley, immediately to set the record straight, saying the

films had been made by the three sisters together, and it was incorrect to credit her as the sole author just because that was the way they had divided up the credits.²

Two other women scenario writers are also worth noting here, Agnes Gavin and Louise Lovely, although their work will not be explored in depth in this chapter. Agnes Gavin turned her hand to writing scenarios for her husband, director John Gavin. They were both stage and vaudeville actors who became best known for making low-budget 'quickie' bushranger stories and convict-era melodramas. (Pike and Cooper 1998: 11) In 1911 alone Gavin is credited as the scenario writer on six films, most were about bushrangers. Bushranger stories were enormously popular with local audiences as Australians loved outlaws and cheered on anyone brave enough to take their colonial masters to task. The Gavins were not the only people cashing in on the genre and between 1911 and 1912, the New South Wales, Victorian and South Australian governments all banned films about bushrangers, concerned they were undermining the authority of the police. World war broke out in 1914 and film production turned to supporting the war effort. Gavin and her husband achieved some international success with their film *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* (1916). It was based on the true story of an English nurse who was executed by the German Army for helping some 200 Allied soldiers escape from German occupied Belgium. Their next film *The Murder of Captain Fryatt* (1917) was also about German war atrocities, but it was not received as well. They returned to genre with *His Convict Bride* (1918) before moving to Hollywood where John Gavin worked as an actor on westerns and comedies. In 1925, Gavin and her husband returned to Australia where she wrote the final script for their film *Trooper O'Brien* (1928).

Silent screen star Louise Lovely left Australia for America in 1914 making approximately 50 films in Hollywood before returning to Australia in 1924. Lovely's interest in areas other than acting had been evident as early as 1913 when she and her husband, Wilton Welch, had co-written 'The Warning' a play about the white slave traffic. (Wright 1986: 27) In 1924 she returned to Australia and toured with Welch in a show they devised together called 'A Day at The Studio.' It capitalised on her stardom by offering local fans the experience of seeing how films were made. Travelling with a cinematographer and editing facilities they offered locals a chance to screen test and then return the following week to see themselves on film. While in Tasmania, writer Marie Bjelkie-Peterson requested Lovely consider her novel *Jewelled Nights* as a possible film. Lovely wrote the adaptation, co directed and co produced it with Welch. She also starred in it, and edited it. (Wright 1986: 27) *Jewelled Nights* (1925) was an expensive production and while the film was received well, it didn't recover costs. Lovely attributed this to the amount of money taken by distributors and exhibitors - she claimed that in one week in Melbourne the film took £1,565 out of which the producers received £382.³ Her marriage disintegrated and she remarried a film exhibitor who offered to take her back to Hollywood, but she declined. (Wright 1986: 29)

Issues around distribution and exhibition plagued the early Australian filmmakers. In 1913 a series of takeovers and mergers in distribution and exhibition led to the creation of the monopolistic 'combine' trading as Australasian Films.⁴ The 'combine' - Union Theatres and an associated production and distribution company became focussed on importing films from Hollywood and Britain rather than in exhibiting Australian films,

and local filmmakers found it increasingly difficult to get their films seen. The 'combine' retained industry dominance until they faced rivalry from Hoyts and the appearance of the American film exchanges during World War 1. (Shirley & Adams 1983:33) In 1927, a Royal Commission into the Motion Picture industry recommended a quota system for Australian films, but the Royal Commission's quota was never implemented. In 1928 the talkies arrived and Australian audiences flocked to the movies in even greater numbers. But the Americans held the patent on the most accessible (albeit expensive) equipment and costs proved prohibitive for local filmmakers. After a number of failed attempts Tasmanian engineer, Arthur Smith, came up with an idea and developed Australia's first successful sound-on-film recording process, the Smith and Cross system.⁵ However the delay meant the first Australian talking picture did not appear until 1930 and by this stage the world had plunged into Depression following the 1929 Wall Street crash. The narration for the dramatised documentary *Hunt Angels* (2006) would later state:

[...] when the big Hollywood studios went bankrupt during the Depression, the bankers and the gangsters moved in. Desperate to make quick profits to keep the place going they looked off shore to dump their product. They knew Australians were mad about the movies. [...] Hollywood agents moved in. They bought out all the best picture palaces in the city and took over every company that distributed films. These agents went to every picture theatre in the city and said from here on in you take everything we give you, or you'll get nothing at all. Those cinemas that said no went to the wall. (Morgan 2006)⁶

This practice was known as the block-booking system and it meant cinema owners signed up for films that hadn't even been made. If a local producer wanted their film screened they not only had to pay their own publicity costs, they had to recompense the cinema owner for the Hollywood film they were not screening. It was part of a vertical integration system the major Hollywood studios developed and practiced all over the world in order to funnel profits back to Hollywood, but it effectively shut local filmmakers out. (Morgan 2006)⁷ ⁸In 1934 an Inquiry into the Film Industry in New South Wales led to the New South Wales government passing legislation for a 2% Australian content quota system, but the distributors often got around this by showing local newsreels and as many local shorts as they could. In the 1930s fifty Australian feature length pictures were produced compared to ninety in the 1920s. Many of these were Hollywood style studio comedies and musicals with local stars. These films proved popular with local audiences and made money at the box office, but the coming of World War 11 meant all resources were put into the wartime propaganda newsreels and documentaries and feature film making was discouraged. Hollywood films flooded the local market and Australian feature film production declined. Eventually the local studios closed down. In the thirty years between 1940 and 1970 only 60 features were produced.

In the 1970s government support for the local film industry resulted in an Australian film renaissance and once again Australians began to produce features in significant numbers. Feminism was sweeping the world and low budget independent films by women began to appear. Women also stepped back into feature production again as writers and directors. Joan Long, who had been writing and directing documentaries adapted 'Caddie, the story of a barmaid' by Catherine (Caddie) Edmunds for producer Anthony Buckley. *Caddie*

(Crombie 1976) achieved international acclaim, ran for 54 weeks in a city cinema in Sydney, and grossed over \$2.5 million dollars, when the ticket price was only \$2.50. (Buckley 2009: 198) Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* (1979) was an adaptation of Miles Franklin's novel of the same name. The screenplay was written by Eleanor Witcombe, who had written for theatre, radio and television before adapting *The Getting Of Wisdom* (1978) by Henry Handel Richardson⁹ for Bruce Beresford. When Gillian Armstrong directed *My Brilliant Career* she was the first woman to direct a feature film in Australia since Paulette McDonagh directed *Two Minutes Silence* in 1933.

My interest in sharing the stories of the early woman scenario writers has come from teaching both screenwriting and Australian film history and realising that although much of Australia's early film history, including the role of women in it, was meticulously researched in the aftermath of the renaissance by film scholars such as Andree Wright, Marilyn Dooley, Graham Shirley, Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, many students had no idea of the rich history waiting to be explored, or that women had played a major role from the beginning as both scenario writers and filmmakers. Stepping back in time and looking at some of the original screenplays in the archives, typed on delicate rice paper with love and care, I feel a sense of urgency for unless history is retold again and again it is lost, and unless women's history is recovered and, in the case of the early women scenario writers, re evaluated then the work of these women will be forgotten.

Lottie Lyell

For a young woman like, Lottie Lyell, growing up in Australia during the early days of the new century was a time full of possibility and promise. The suffragettes had been had

been campaigning for votes for women since at least 1884, and by 1908, when Lyell was 19 years old, white women in all states finally won the right to vote ahead of many European countries.¹⁰ Three years later Lyell starred in *The Romantic Story of Margaret Catchpole* (1911), and it was this early film that brought her to the attention of Australian audiences. It was based on the true story of a woman convict transported to the penal colony of New South Wales for stealing a horse to help her lover escape. Lyell played the title role, riding the producer's magnificent dapple grey horse, Arno, in a dashing and swashbuckling sequence that is one of the few scenes from the film that have survived. When Lyell stole the horse, disguised as a boy, and bravely rode it pursued by the law, she rode into the hearts and minds of Australians looking for new kinds of heroines.



Figure 1: Lottie Lyell in *The Romantic Story of Margaret Catchpole* (1911)

Lyell didn't fit easily into the image of a glamorous screen star. Instead she had a genuine quality and an understated performance style that touched people's hearts. She never played antagonistic characters, usually playing plucky, intelligent heroines facing danger, exploitation or discrimination. She did all her own stunts and was an accomplished

horsewoman. While men dominated the new film industry, young women seized opportunities where they could. Budgets were low and film crews small, often just the director, the cameraman and a couple of assistants. It was an opportunity for young women who found themselves on set when things needed to be done and actresses like Lottie Lyell and Louise Lovely jumped in and got their hands dirty, learning all aspects of production at the same time as rising to stardom both at home and abroad as silent film heroines.



Figure 2: Lottie Lyell *Eileen* has succeeded in getting out of the cellar. Scene 26
The Church and The Woman (Longford 1917).

At the age of 19 Lyell was working as a professional stage actor and when she toured New Zealand in the play, *An Englishman's Home* (1909), her parents put her in the care of fellow actor, Raymond Longford, a family friend, and a married man. Lyell and Longford soon formed a partnership that would last right up until her death from

tuberculosis in 1925, aged 35. Longford directed and Lyell starred in nearly all the films, but she also worked tirelessly behind the scenes writing, editing, art directing, co directing and producing. Years later Longford wrote: ‘Lottie Lyell was my partner in all our film activities.’¹¹ Yet Longford’s name is on all the scripts until 1916 when she is credited as co writer on both *A Maori Maid’s Love* (1916) and *Mutiny of The Bounty* (1916). The following year Lyell starred in *The Church and The Woman* (1917) and then *The Woman Suffers* (1918) yet curiously she is only credited as an actress in them. Given that both films are about women unjustly accused of crimes, or treated poorly by men they have loved and trusted, it is hard to imagine Longford coming up with these ideas and then developing the scripts alone. Asked if he thought Lyell played a significant role as a scenario writer from the beginning, Australian producer Anthony Buckley, who as a young man met and interviewed Longford, replied: ‘Without question: The Lyell fingerprints are over everything.’¹²

My search for evidence of Lyell’s contribution as a writer on the early films has meant looking for those fingerprints, and this has inevitably involved a degree of speculation. Feminist film scholar and archivist, Marilyn Dooley, believes that Lyell was ‘the reader’; that many of the early films were based on potboilers or popular romantic stories of the day that targeted women readers, and it was Lyell who read them and championed them¹³. Given the sexual division of labour of the time it makes sense to assume that Lyell was also the typist; that she typed while Longford dictated, but given accounts of their relationship it is probably closer to the truth to suggest that they discussed every aspect of the screenplay, while her hands were on the typewriter, forming words on the page and thinking about the images. Silent films depended on visual storytelling and Lyell was an

actor whose work on screen showed a clear understanding of the demands of the new medium. The films she and Longford made are distinctive for their naturalistic acting style as well as the sophistication of their film language. This grasp of film language is often attributed to Longford,¹⁴ but it was Lyell who was editing the films, not Longford. Having her hands on the film itself would have quickly taught her about the new language and this in turn would have informed her work as both an actress and writer.

The copyright requirements of the time required the scenario, along with a still photograph from each scene, be submitted for copyright. This put pressure on filmmakers because it meant the film had to be shot first in order for the photographs to be included. Luckily this has meant that a number of the scenarios, plus accompanying stills, survive where the films are themselves lost. Lyell is reported as being a meticulous person, and this is born out by the scenarios that are available for study, particularly in their use of color. In the early 1900s typewriter ribbons were available in black and various other colors, but in 1910 some typewriters were equipped to use two-colour ribbons as well. The usual combination was purple and red. Users could switch easily between the two colours. Copies could also be produced by using sheets of very thin paper, and placing carbon paper between them.¹⁵

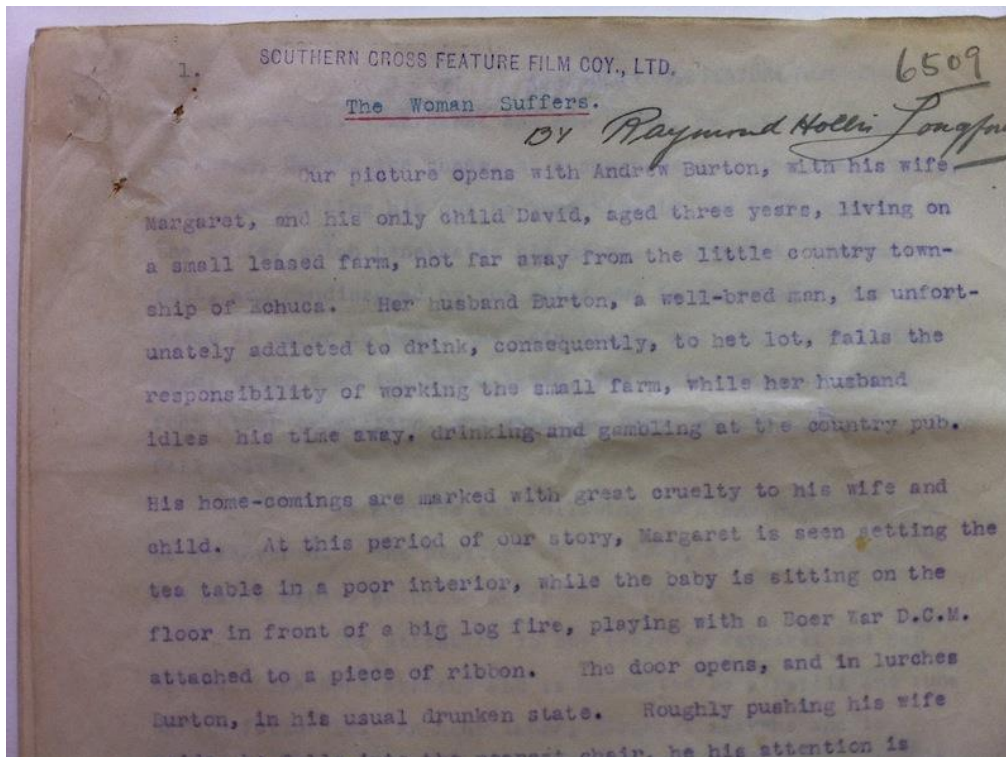


Figure 3: *The Woman Suffers* (Longford 1918) Scenario p 1. (part)

The scenario for *The Woman Suffers* (1918) is typed in purple, but the main title has been typed in blue on page one and underlined in red. Perhaps Lottie hurriedly added it later for the copyright submission, but even this small fingerprint shows an attention to detail as she has adjusted the ribbon in order to neatly underline the title in red. Longford's name as sole author of the scenario has been handwritten under this title, yet the first line reads 'Our picture opens with...'

Cameraman Lacey Percival who did two pictures with Longford and Lyell claimed:

She allowed him to take the credit for everything, which he did. I think her name should have come first. [...] My experience was that she directed the pictures and everyone looked to her. They hardly ever went to Ray to ask a question. [...] I reckon she put him on the map.¹⁶

It was well known in film circles that Longford and Lyell's relationship was more than a just a business one. Longford's Catholic wife refused to give him a divorce so they never married, but when Lyell's father died, Longford, moved into the house with her and her mother. 'Living with the fatherless family may not have appeared as scandalous as it actually was' (MacDonald 1985) but no one really knows what went on under that roof.



Figure 4: *A Maori Maid's Love* (1916) Lyell and Longford on set.

Longford always claimed she was very religious, implying she was chaste, but this is at odds with stories like *The Woman Suffers* (1918) and *The Church and the Woman* where the young women protagonists are not at all chaste. They are in fact passionate and sexually adventurous, but 'suffer' when taken advantage of by unscrupulous men, with

devious agendas. In *The Woman Suffragist* (1918) the cad who has taken advantage of Lyell's character returns to apologize to her in the end and they are reunited, along with the child she has had out of wedlock. Longford's wife finally agreed to a divorce, but it came through just after Lyell died. Curiously none of Lyell's papers have survived. Longford was the executor of her will and they would have ended up in either his hands or her mother's, but apart from one letter and her signature on a few documents there are no papers left to study.

"Hayraug"
Lord St.
Roseville
Tues night.

Dear Tom

Am sending
this in a great hurry
in hopes that it will
reach you early tomorrow
morning (Wed) on receipt
of which I would like
you to come up to
Roseville straight away
you might phone me on
your way to let me
know if you are
coming.

Thanking you & with
kind regards

Sincerely,
Lottie Lyell

Figure 5: Handwritten letter by Lottie Lyell – National Film and Sound Archive

Silent films often used handwritten letters to convey exposition and Lyell's handwriting is quite distinctive, in particular her capital Ds and Ls. Comparing the one surviving letter and the handwritten letters that appear on screen in *The Woman Suffragist*, I quickly realised the handwriting was hers.

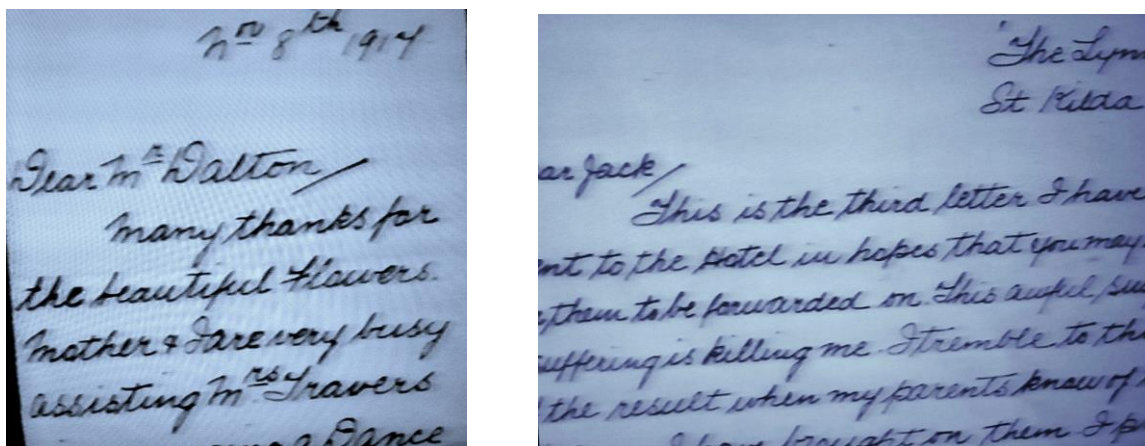


Figure 6 & 7: Screen shots of letters from *The Woman Suffers* (1918)

The mystery of Lyell's personal papers remains unsolved. Perhaps her mother or Longford destroyed them as they proved Lyell had lived a more sexually adventurous life like many artists of the time and, like the character in *The Woman Suffers*, would have been condemned publically for this. Longford remarried after her death and his new wife took charge of all his papers. She gave them to Merv Wasson who was working on a biography of Longford. Years later Marilyn Dooley, from the National Film and Sound Archive went through them carefully, but found no sign of Lyell's papers, although she did find a faded copy of the scenario for *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), which Lyell has a co writing credit on. The original had been submitted to the NSW Police Department, as Longford wished to film an illegal Two Up game being raided by police, and needed permission. Luckily the police failed to return it and Longford's papers contained correspondence, which led Dooley to the State Records Office of New South Wales where the original scenario is still held.

During the silent era scenarios often looked more like prose outlines or treatments. Some included locations and inter title cards, but they were a lot less detailed than the screenplays we are used to today. Silent films didn't require dialogue to be written; they plotted out the story describing the main actions as necessary. Intertitle cards were included if exposition was considered necessary and could always be rewritten later. This meant directors and actors could work freely on set, developing complexity through improvisation, and any changes could be incorporated during the editing process. Scenarios were therefore written with a different mind set or production process in mind.¹⁷ They were also significantly shorter than screenplays for talking pictures. The scenario for *The Church and The Woman* (1917) submitted for copyright along with a set of black and white photographs is written in prose paragraphs and is only 10 pages long.

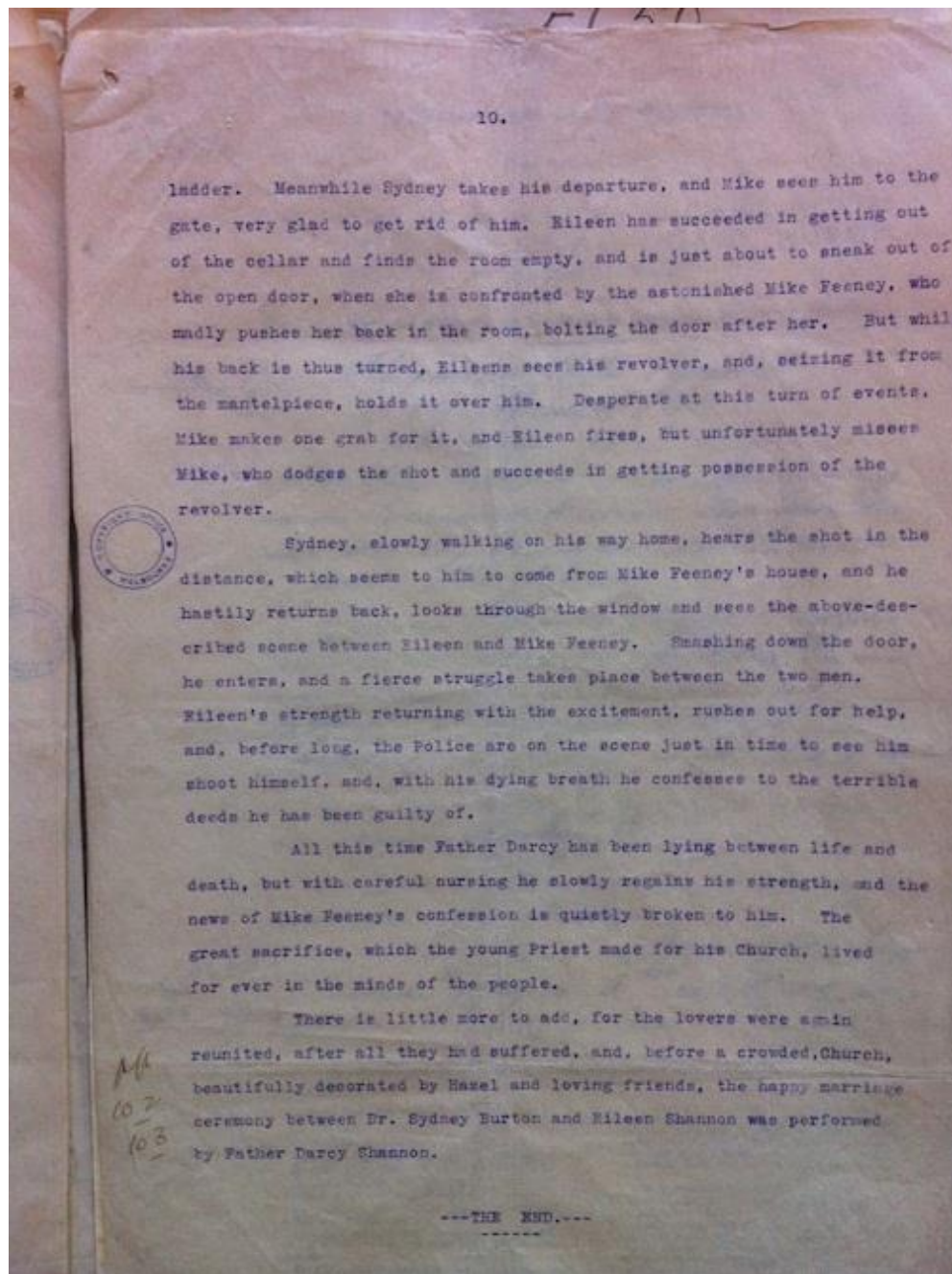


Figure 9: *The Church and The Woman* (1917) scenario. P.10



Figure 10: Lottie Lyell in *The Church and The Woman* (1917)

Eileen sees his revolver, and, seizing it from the mantelpiece, holds it over him.

The scenario for *Mutiny of The Bounty* (1916) is only 13 pages long, yet it was feature length and in terms of format looks more like a modern screenplay. Scene numbers and locations are included along with intertitle cards, which are indented in the same way dialogue is now routinely indented. This was only the second film where Lyell received a formal credit as co writer and the scenario shows an artistic attention to detail that is distinctive. Lyell was clearly using a blue and red two-color ribbon as the scene numbers and title cards are typed in red, and the locations and scene descriptions are typed in blue. She was also making copies as the original scenario in the archives has been typed on delicate, extremely thin, rice paper. This careful and time consuming use of colour is surely another fingerprint, as is the correction on page 10 where House has been crossed out and Home has been written instead.

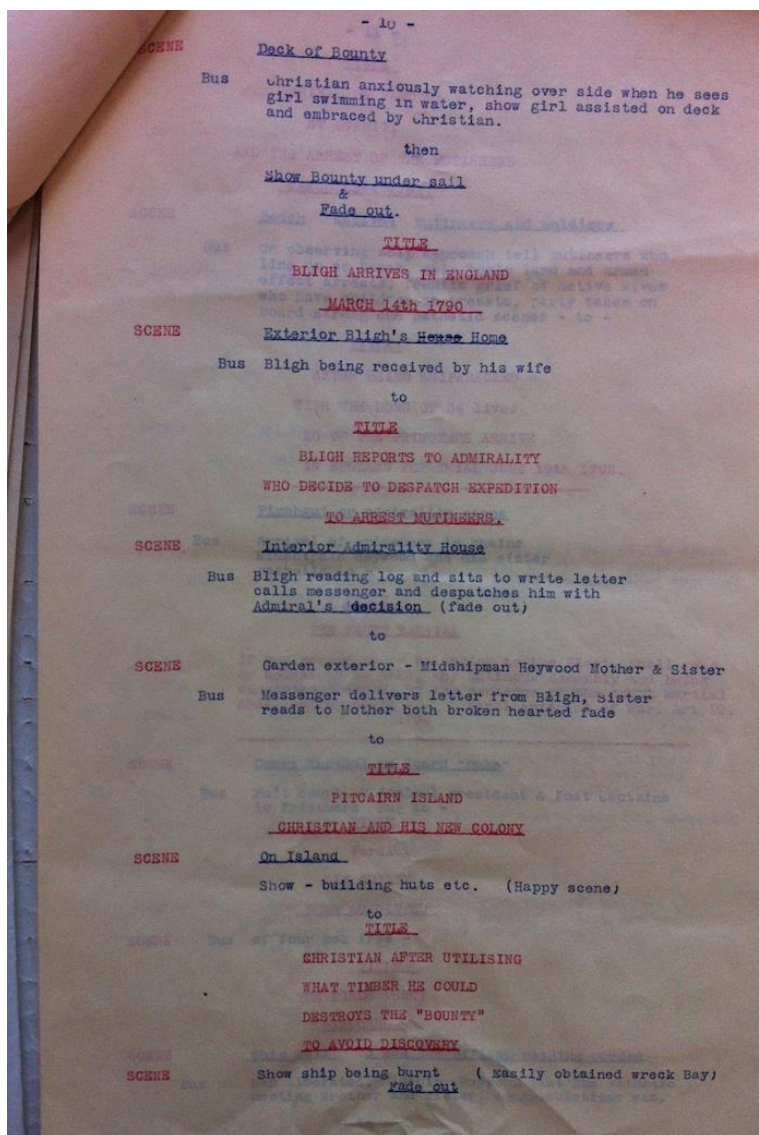


Figure 11. *Mutiny of the Bounty* scenario (1916) p.10

The scenario for *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919) is one of the longest scenarios from the Longford/Lyell team that survives. It is 40 pages long, which is closer to the length of a modern feature treatment, but it is a lot more spaced out and has scene numbers written down the left hand side like a stage script.

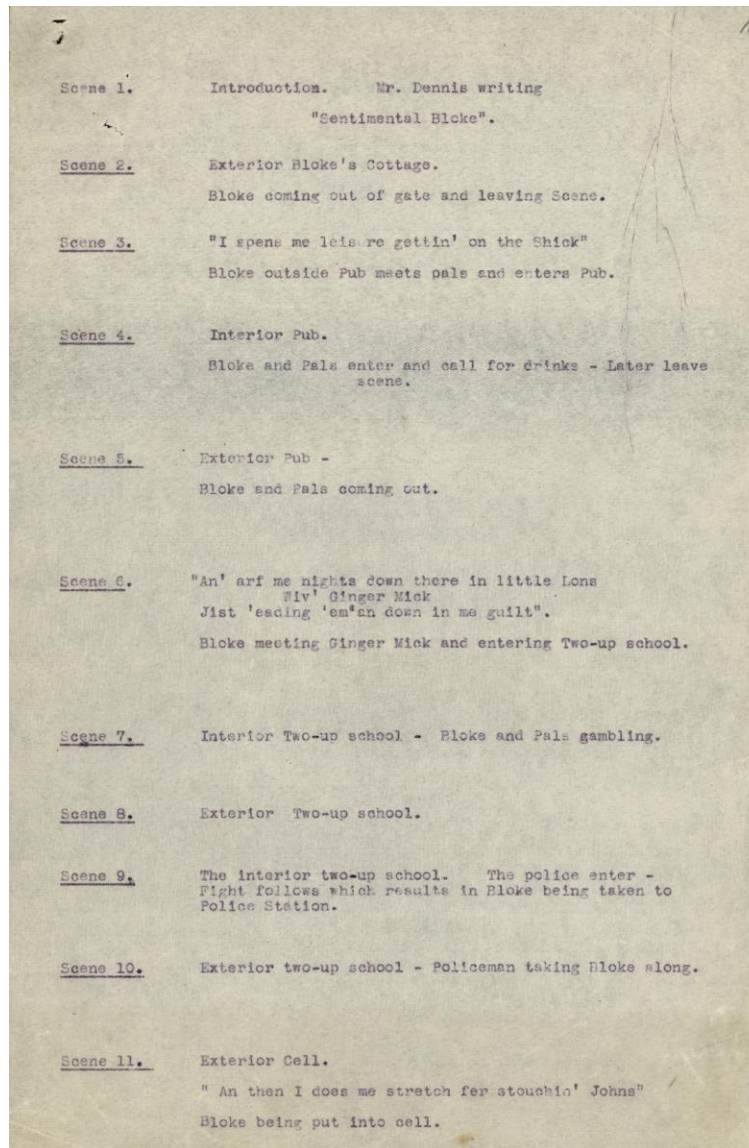


Figure 8: Original scenario for *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919) p.1

Longford and Lyell achieved both local and international success with *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), which was based on the C.J. Dennis poem of the same name. Lyell starred as the lovable Doreen but she also holds co screenplay, editing, art direction and production assistant credits.

Marjorie Osbourne who played the lead in *The Blue Mountains Mystery* (1921), said:

Lottie Lyell appealed to me. I like brains in a woman and she had them. [...] She assisted Mr Longford and the two of them had plenty of healthy arguments when their ideas on a scene differed.¹⁹

The *Blue Mountains Mystery* (1921) was an adaptation of the novel *The Mount Marunga Mystery* by Harrison Owen and in this case Lyell holds the sole screenwriting credit as well as a co directing credit. Here she is on set standing between cinematographer Arthur Higgins and Longford, her hands firmly on the script.



Figure 12: Longford and Lyell with cinematographer Arthur Higgins and lighting assistant on the set for *The Blue Mountains Mystery* (1921)

Only three of the 28 films they made together have survived and only one in its entirety. Some scenes from *The Romantic Story of Margaret Catchpole* and *The Woman Suffers* exist, but a 35mm print of *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919) was found in Melbourne in 1952. In 1953 it was re-spliced by a young, Anthony Buckley, in order for a 16mm duplicate negative and print to be made.

My first discovery was that although the film was silent, it was not in black and white, each scene was tinted a different tone, [...] There was not the money to provide for a 35mm negative and print. Eastmancolour processing had not yet arrived in Australia for a tinted print to be made... (Buckley 2009: 17,18)

In 1973 Australian archivist, Ray Edmonson discovered the original 35mm camera negative in George Eastman House in New York. It had been reedited and the intertitles changed as the Americans altered the Australian vernacular for the American market. This made it possible to marry the surviving Australian copy, which was poor quality and thought to have been a 35mm copy of the 16mm print made in the 50s, with the American one. (Case 2009: 67-69) The film was lovingly restored by Australian archivists and film technicians and completed in 2003. The colour tints were able to be matched as the edges of the frame on the one surviving faded nitrate print reel had not been exposed to the projector's arc, and the traces of colour found there were a significantly deeper hue. (Case 2009: 71) Like the multi-coloured typed scenarios, could this careful use of colour be another Lyell fingerprint?

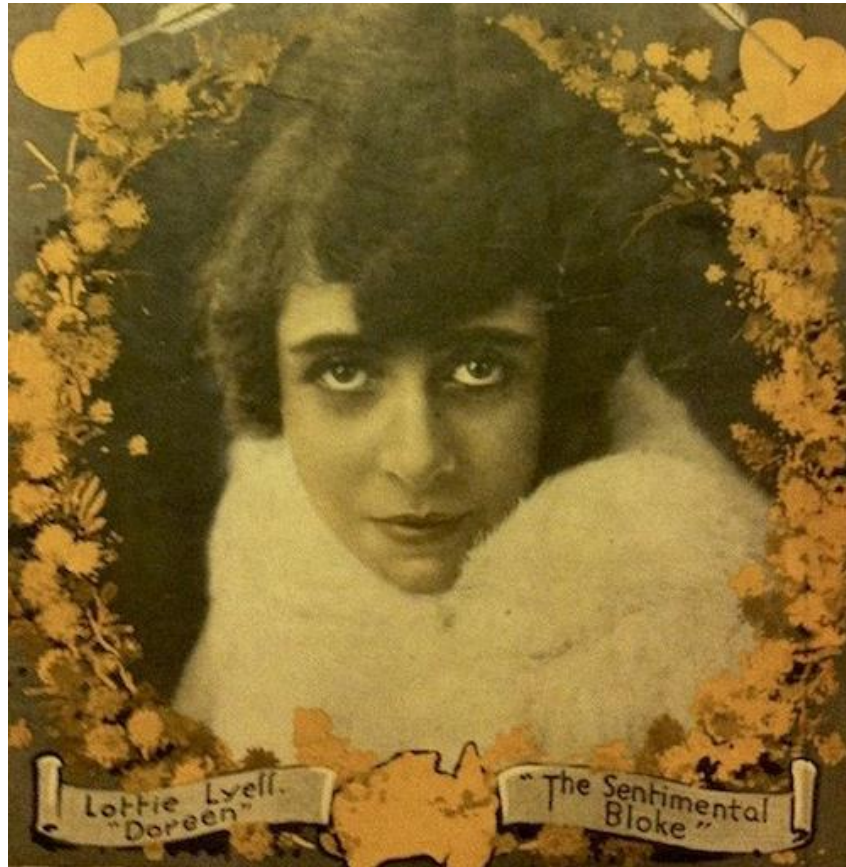


Figure 13: Lottie Lyell (1919) *The Picture Show* magazine. ²⁰

After Lyell died Longford never again achieved the success of the early films. He ended up a solitary figure working on the Sydney waterfront as a night watchman. Lyell's death had meant the end of a dynamic and creative partnership and he was heartbroken, but it was also a difficult time for local filmmakers. The talkies had meant a massive increase in production costs and Australian filmmakers were increasingly unable to compete with the Hollywood juggernaut, which was dominating cinema exhibition and distribution. Lyell and Longford are buried in the same grave. Her epitaph reads *Lottie Lyell Cox – Photo play artiste*

The McDonagh Sisters

The McDonagh sisters Paulette, Phyllis and Isobel produced four feature films together between 1926 and 1933. They were arguably ‘the most talented of the late silent era filmmakers in Australia and the most courageous of the early talkies.’ (Shirley 1978: 5) Paulette was the writer and the director, Phyllis the production manager and art director and Isobel, the eldest, was the star under the name Marie Lorraine. They worked collaboratively ‘from discussion of the storyline onwards, although Paulette had final say as director.’ (Shirley 1988: 3) Paulette and Phyllis wrote the scenario for *Those who Love* (1927) while they were still at school. They always shared a bedroom, even when they were producing films together, and would often stay up all night discussing books, plays, films and ideas for storylines. In an interview in 1988, their younger sister, Paula Dornan claimed: ‘They would never have bought a hairpin without consulting each other, they were so close.’ (Dornan 1988) The neighbours often heard raised voices at night and thought they were fighting, but this was not the case. It was just the three sisters engaged in robust discussion, often into the small hours of the morning. ‘They would spend days fighting over a subtitle. The wording.’ (Dornan 1988) In an interview in 1974 Paulette McDonagh said: ‘We were so loyal. We were so close. We didn’t need outside friends or companionship.’²¹

The McDonagh sisters grew up in a large house in College Street in inner city Sydney with four younger siblings. Their mother was the Spanish daughter of the Argentinian Consul and a trained nurse and their father was a surgeon who had a love of the fine arts,

theatre and music. McDonagh inherited his father's prestigious Macquarie Street medical practice, but moved it into the family home, which he rented in the heart of Sydney. McDonagh was the honorary surgeon for J.C. Williamson's Theatre Company. This meant the girls grew up going to the Saturday theatre matinees. "We cut our teeth on theatre. When we went to boarding school that's all we talked and thought about. Schoolwork was a poor second." (Shirley 1978: 15) On Sunday nights their parents would often host soirees for local and visiting actors and the girls witnessed high society rubbing shoulders with bohemian life. They also witnessed poverty as their house backed onto the laneways of the working class suburb of Darlinghurst. Their sister, Paula, tells stories about Isabel, Paulette and Phyllis pouring pitchers of water over the young blades and their girls; all dressed up in their finery on their way to the Domain Park to promenade, and how the younger children would often thrust the family's silver spoons and food through the slats in the back gate to the poor and hungry children of Darlinghurst. (Dornan 1988) When it came to charging for his medical services their father was always generous with the poor and tough with the rich and the first three films the sisters made were society melodramas set in the city that '...contrasted an upper middle class with that of the slum dweller or underprivileged.' (Shirley 1978: 16)

Their mother loved the pictures and every Saturday night the whole McDonagh clan would go to the pictures. There were seven children and they would occupy a whole row. (Dornan 1988) The girls were in the early teens when war broke out in 1914 and during these impressionable years would have witnessed women routinely doing men's jobs. The sisters grew up in an urbane and privileged environment where social justice was valued, but they were also exposed to risk-taking as their father often made '...bad

investments; gold mines, silver mines, strings of racehorses and he was robbed on every one of them. Never made any money. What money he had he spent or gave to charity.’ (Dornan 1988) The sisters perpetuated the myth that they came from a wealthy background when in fact money was often scarce particularly after their father died. They also perpetuated the myth that they made their first film with money their father gave them. He may well have, but it came from an inheritance from a Chilean uncle on their mother’s side, Uncle Ernest Amora, who died leaving eight thousand pounds to the family. One thousand of which was used to finance *Those Who Love* (1926). (Dornan 1988) In this case the investment did make money.

Those Who Love told a story about ‘an upper class outcast falling in love with, losing and regaining, a lower class showgirl’. (Shirley 1978: 16). It was enormously popular earning more money in Australia in 1926 than Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush*. (Dornan 1988) Most Australian films of the time were set in the bush and portrayed male protagonists as heroes or buffoons battling both an inhospitable environment and their colonial masters. The McDonaghs were more interested in relationships. Their films were emotional ‘melodramas of romance, sacrifice and parental opposition’ (Wright 1986). The sisters set their films in the city and rejected the prevailing ethos that Australian films had to be ‘redolent with the smell of gum leaves.’ (Dooley 1986)²² Having grown up watching American and European films they wanted to make films that were as good or better than overseas films. ‘They had the sense to realise that they knew so little that they had to find that knowledge.’ (Dornan 1988) They spent hours at the cinema watching the Hollywood and European movies over and over again and studying the way they were put together. ‘The sisters paid careful attention to Australian films. They saw that few local directors,

unlike those overseas, took the trouble to build emotional rhythm, through shot size and cutting. (Shirley 1978: 15) ‘Paulette realised that scenario writing was an art. You could be the greatest playwright, but you can’t write a scenario.’ (Dornan 1988) She set about learning how to do it and as there was no one in Australia offering courses, she signed up for a Hollywood scenario-writing course by correspondence. Correspondence courses with Hollywood ‘experts’ were being advertised in Australian newspapers as early as 1916.

Great local interest has been aroused by the announcement that a real live American photoplay expert is conducting classes for tuition in the highly remunerative art of scenario (or picture play) writing. Many enterprising local residents of both sexes [...] have taken advantage of this splendid opportunity and rapidly qualified themselves under the expert tuition of Mr R.W. Williams. [...] Send in your name and address, accompanied by an enrolment fee, and by return post the full and complete course will be mailed you. ²³

In 1916 a column by ‘Kinema’ in the Melbourne newspaper, the Argus, stated that: ‘The American magazines abound in advertisements of correspondence schools, which profess not only to teach scenario writing, but further claim to be able to dispose of the scenarios written by their students to the principal studios.’ ²⁴ After taking one of these courses Paulette became the main writer and, Phyllis, who later became a short story writer, and a successful journalist, worked with her.

After Phyllis and Paulette had spent “whole days and nights” working out the storyline, they would flesh out the characters; then Paulette would spend up to two months writing the scenario, or shooting script. Further collaboration with Phyllis would come in the co-writing of dialogue for intertitles. (Shirley1978: 17)

Isobel, the family beauty, had already started acting in theatre and films and they created female protagonists for her to play; complex characters with conflicting desires which allowed her to develop her acting skills. Like Lottie Lyell, she developed a naturalistic and understated performance style that was more suited to the demands of the big screen. Given the collaborative nature of the sister’s working relationships no doubt Isobel also contributed to the scenarios.

On 14 September 1925 Paulette submitted *Those Who Love* for copyright. She called the document a ‘Detailed Synopsis.’

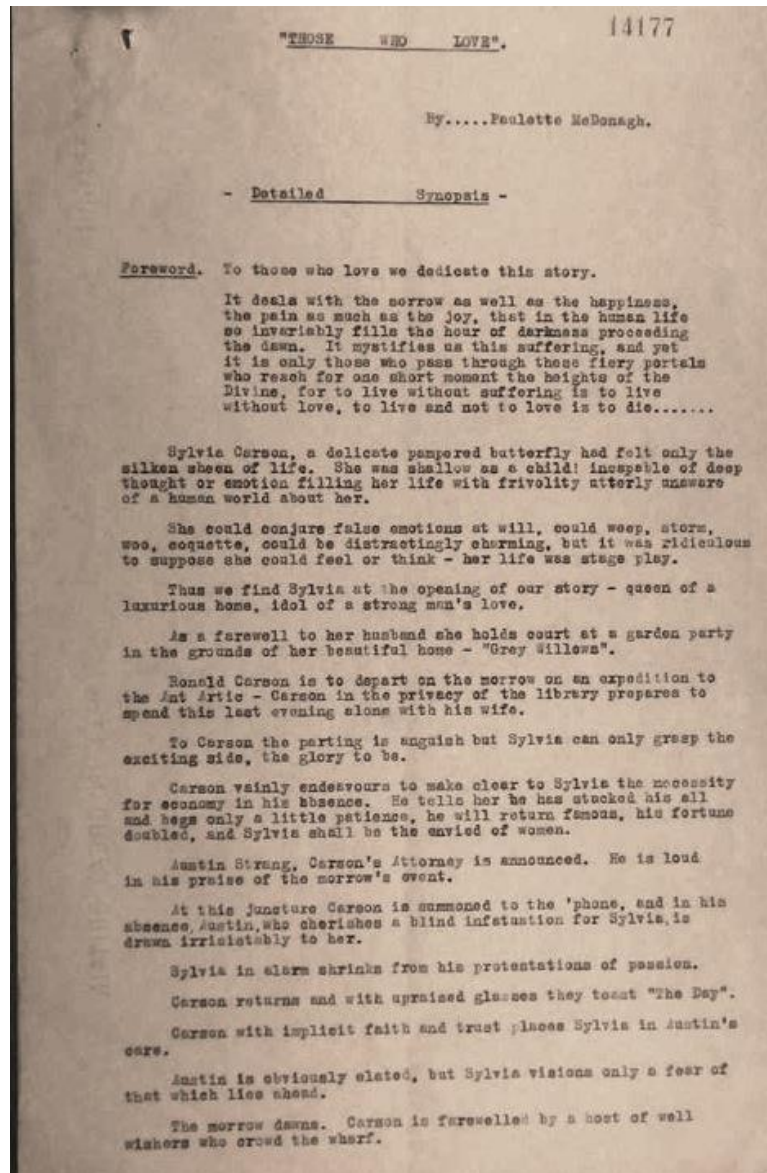


Fig. 14 *Those Who Love* - Detailed Synopsis by Paulette McDonagh p.1.

Unfortunately there is no record of any of their shooting scripts in the archives. The only other entry is a 19 page unproduced scenario for a film called *The Greater Love*. Written in prose like a short story it was obviously still a working document as it contains numerous hand-written corrections.

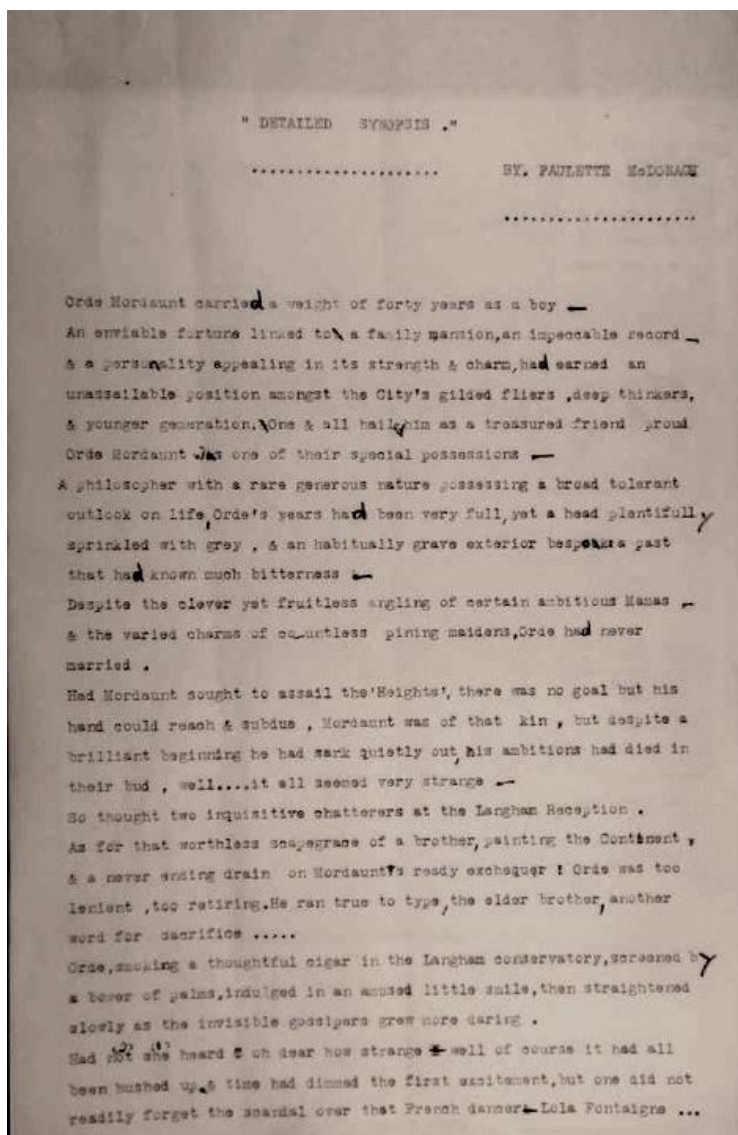


Fig 15. *The Greater Love* unproduced scenario

Their father died before he could see *Those Who Love* (1926). The house in College Street was rented and a group of McDonagh's friends got together and advised his widow to use what money there was to buy a large house, big enough to live in and also run a convalescent home. She was a trained nurse and the friends promised to send patients to her, which they later did. Eventually Drummoyne House, a stately mansion with 40 rooms became available. A convalescent home was set up on one level and the family

lived on another. The girls quickly realized that the house, along with the family furniture, could be used as a set. ‘When Uncle Ernest died it gave the girls the opportunity of starting pictures. We had this lovely home and they were able to do it on a shoestring budget.’ (Dornan 1988) *Those Who Love* (1926) and *The Far Paradise* (1928) were both shot there. The sisters were quickly feted in the press as plucky society girls who were headstrong and talented.

The McDonagh’s films were ‘infinitely more sophisticated than any other local films of the period (Shirley 1978:5) They showed a clear grasp of film language and a sophistication in their plotting that was unusual for the time. The influence of German Expressionism is also clear in their use of shadows and deep space.



Figure 16 & 17: Isobel McDonagh (Marie Lorraine) in *Those Who Love* (1926)

The first two films did well at the box office, but things were proving difficult for local filmmakers and both Raymond Longford and Isobel McDonagh testified at the 1927 Royal Commission arguing for protection for the local industry. After their mother died, Isobel took charge, but like their father the sisters were reckless with money and by the

time they made *The Cheaters* (1930) the money had run out and they had had to sell Drummoyne House.

We were young and we had nobody in charge of us. Had we had a manager or somebody to tell us what to do, we'd have been on top of the world. [...] When we made films anything we earned we used to put on these huge parties at Drummoyne House of 150 people, full evening dress. Great parties and it would go on all night and until dawn the next day. (Paulette McDonagh 1974) ²⁵



Figure 18: *The Cheaters* Marie Lorraine (Paula Marsh), veiled and pointing a revolver at Josef Bambach (Lee Tavers).



Figure 19 Paulette McDonagh directing *The Cheaters*

Then the talkies arrived and everything changed. The McDonaghs attempted to turn parts of *The Cheaters* (1930) into a talkie in order to enter it into a competition, but technology failed them and the screening was a disaster. In another risk-taking decision the McDonaghs turned down a lucrative offer from Frank Thring Senior who ran Efftee Studios to make films for him. He promised to take them to Hollywood, but they declined. They had younger siblings to bring up, but they were also headstrong and still believed they could continue to make their own way.

Despite the Depression, the sisters made several short sporting documentaries with financial backing from Standardtone Film Production Co. [...] The McDonaghs' fourth and final feature, *Two Minutes Silence* (1933), was based on Les Haylen's stark anti-war play. In strong contrast to their early melodramas, its theme of serious social realism was praised by critics but failed to please audiences craving romance and comedy. (Wright 1986)



Fig 20 Paulette McDonagh directing *Two Minute Silence*

Two Minutes Silence (1934) was a talkie and financed by Isobel's husband-to-be businessman, Charles Stewart. Paulette worked on the adaptation with the playwright Leslie Haylen. The Australian poet and critic Kenneth Slessor described the film as 'capable of challenging comparison with world standards. The whole effect is one of beauty and strength. There is nothing cheap about the theme, nothing rubbed or shop soiled; and the treatment is surprisingly free of banality.'²⁶ However, the sisters paid dearly for their earlier decision to snub Thring who now owned the Hoyts cinema chain, and he refused to screen it.

Paulette wrote a scenario for a feature film called *Flynn of The Inland* about Australia's pioneering flying doctor, John Flynn, but it was never financed and she eventually gave up. Isobel had married and gone overseas and Phyllis had moved to New Zealand where she was working as a journalist. They had chosen different paths and it just wasn't the

same without them. Paulette lived a bohemian life in Kings Cross until her death in 1978. A little over a week before she died the sisters were honoured by the Australian Film Institute's lifetime achievement award, The Raymond Longford Award²⁷, but Phyllis lost the award in a cab. It was never recovered, but it was replaced.

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