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Australian Westerns in the Fifties: Kangaroo, Hopalong Cassidy on Tour, and Whiplash

Derham Groves

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In memory of Lorraine Callander (1944–2022)

PREFACE

I was born in 1956—the same year television arrived in Australia—so I grew up watching lots of American Westerns on TV, such as *Hopalong Cassidy* (1952–1954), *Gunsmoke* (1955–1975), *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (1955–1961), *Tales of the Texas Rangers* (1955–1959), *Have Gun Will Travel* (1957–1963), *Tales of Wells Fargo* (1957–1962), *Wagon Train* (1957–1965), *Bat Masterson* (1958–1961), and *Bonanza* (1959–1973). As kids, my friends and I played “cowboys and Indians” at home and school, armed with cap guns and bows and suction-cup arrows and wearing cowboy hats and Indian headdresses, all purchased from the corner toyshop. One of my favourite children’s books was *The Indians and Cowboys Book* (1962) by Kathryn Jackson (1907–1985) and Byron Jackson (1899–1949) and illustrated by Gustaf Tenggren (1896–1970), which I still own (Fig. 1). Although, I suspect hardly any Australian children play cowboys and Indians nowadays. Travelling on a Melbourne tram recently, I saw a five-year-old boy playfully make a gun with his thumb and forefinger. ‘We don’t do that anymore,’ his 30-something father told him rather sternly!

While American Westerns were all the rage following World War II, they had a certain sameness that prompted some movie and television producers to look for different ways to freshen up the popular but “tired” genre. Since most were filmed ‘within 30 miles of Hollywood and a lot of that scenery is becoming mighty familiar,’ according to one Hollywood insider, some filmmakers decided that a change of scenery might do the trick. “Spaghetti Westerns” made in Europe, such as *A Fist Full of Dollars*

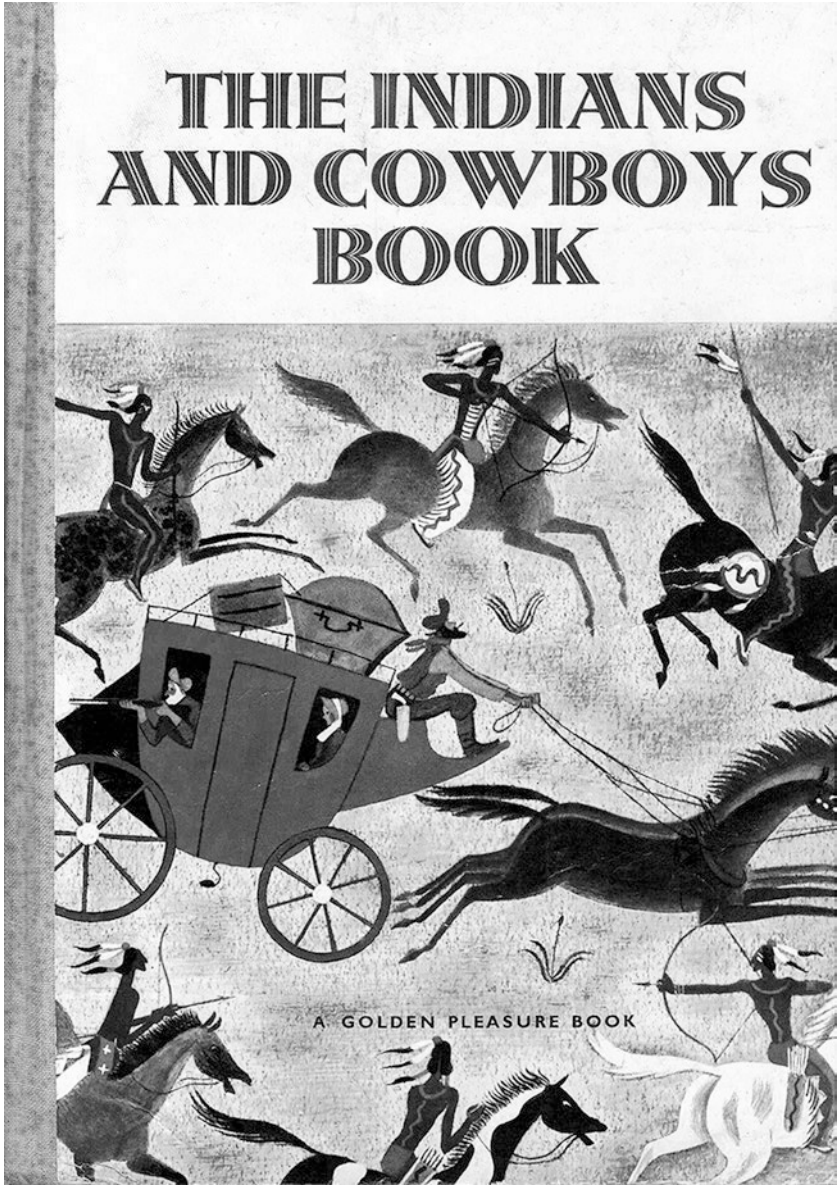


Fig. 1 *The Indians and Cowboys Book* (1962) by Kathryn and Byron Jackson

(1964), *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1967) are well known. On the other hand, “Meat Pie Westerns” made in Australia that pre-date Spaghetti Westerns are less known.

Australian Westerns in the Fifties is the second Palgrave Pivot book I’ve written. I enjoy the discipline imposed by the series’ 50,000-word limit, which is long enough to study a subject in depth but requires a focused outlook. So, while the book is not exhaustive, I believe it is representative. Chapter 1 looks at *Kangaroo: The Australian Story* (1952). It was a big-budget Australian Western film set and made in Australia by a top American motion picture studio at the beginning of the 1950s, starring leading Hollywood performers and aimed at an adult audience. Chapter 2 looks at Hopalong Cassidy’s goodwill tour of Australia in 1954. It illustrates the popularity of cowboys and Westerns with Australian baby boomers and the rise and importance of TV merchandising. Finally, Chap. 3 looks at *Whiplash* (1960–1961). It was a big-budget Australian Western TV series set and made in Australia by a top British TV production company at the end of the 1950s, starring a leading Hollywood actor supported by leading Australian performers and aimed at families. Some common threads run between the three chapters of the book, such as the authority of overseas production companies, the presence of Hollywood actors, encounters with First Nations Australians, etc. Also, post-World War II Australian monetary policy prompted both the making of *Kangaroo* and the visit by Hopalong Cassidy. Before becoming *Kangaroo*’s assistant director, Nate Watt (1889–1968) directed several Hopalong Cassidy Westerns. The use of whips as weapons in *Kangaroo* inspired their similar use in *Whiplash*. Several members of the cast and crew of *Kangaroo* and *Whiplash* worked on the American TV Western *Have Gun Will Travel*. There are many crossovers.

In the 1950s, Australian Westerns were different from American Westerns, which I attribute mainly to the influence of place. Some of the plainest differences, for example, were Aboriginals instead of Native Americans, the bush instead of the prairie, Cobb & Co. instead of Wells Fargo, kangaroos instead of bison, and stockmen instead of cowboys. There were also less evident factors of significance, such as accommodation, remoteness, and the weather. Therefore, I not only look at place but also process, context, and chance. While taking a phenomenological approach to the subject seemed like the obvious way to go to me, surprisingly, few others have done so. Furthermore, because the main participants were sharp-eyed outsiders—Hollywood performers and overseas

filmmakers—a unique picture emerges through the retelling of their stories of everyday life and the film and television industry in Australia during the 1950s.

Brunswick West, VIC, Australia
May 2022

Derham Groves

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The week I write this, the most popular Western in the world is probably the music video for “That That,” a song by cheeky South Korean rapper PSY, featuring SUGA of the K-Pop group BTS. Within a week of its release, it collected over 100 million views online. A posse of synchronised dancers in surreal fringe bring Korean hip-hop to a Western film set (Fig. 2). This is the latest in a long line of K-Pop Western shorts over the past decade, including BTS’s own “Permission to Dance” (2021). In a different register, at the 94th Academy Awards in March 2022, the most prominent Western was *The Power of the Dog*, for which writer and director Jane Campion won Best Director. Campion is from Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the film was shot in the Otago region, standing in for the story’s Montana. Today’s fictional frontier is not your grandfather’s Western. Or is it?

As Derham Groves shows us in this delightful book, the 1950s—the decade known as a Golden Age of Hollywood Westerns in the USA—witnessed a flourishing of Westerns across the Dateline and Down Under from Hollywood. On the big screen (in *Kangaroo*), on the small screen (in *Whiplash*), and in person (in Hopalong Cassidy on Tour), Australia was the setting for a fictional West parallel to and yet distinct from the North American variety. Drawing on the continent’s bush landscape, its Indigenous peoples, and its history of settler colonialism, the “Meat Pie Western” appears here as central to a genre that has in fact been global since its very beginnings.



Fig. 2 “That That” by PSY and featuring SUGA of BTS

In 1875, well before Buffalo Bill Cody sailed the ocean blue with his Wild West crew, German writer Karl May debuted his indelible character Winnetou, the Apache blood brother of the frontiersman Old Shatterhand. In 1906, just three years after the supposed first Western film, the 12-minute *Great Train Robbery*, and four years after the classic American novel *The Virginian*, Australians produced *The Story of the Kelly Gang*. This was arguably the first feature-length “Western” film. By the 1950s and 1960s, the imagined West was being shaped by youth gangs in Kinshasa (Leopoldville) in the Belgian Congo who wore cowboy clothes and called themselves “Bills” after Buffalo Bill, by Israeli pulp novelists narrating the Hebrew tales of Buk G’ons (aka Buck Jones), and by the blockbuster Czech parody *Lemonade Joe, or the Horse Opera*. In the 1970s, Hungarian longhorn grey cattle grazed the cinematic Eastern European Plains; bandits stalked trains in the Indian epic film *Sholay*; and Bob Marley sang “I Shot the Sheriff” and “Buffalo Soldier” in Jamaica.¹

The Western genre is quintessentially American. And yet, like the real American West, it has exchanged ingredients with the rest of the world for a very long time. In Spaghetti Westerns, Goulash Westerns, Masala Westerns, and Ramen Westerns, and here in Meat Pie Westerns, a smorgasbord of stories explore heroes, villains, war, peace, adventure, and dramatic landscapes the world over. (We’ll leave the subject of Space Westerns for another time, though do note in this book how *Star Trek* creator Gene

Roddenberry ventured first to the tales of *Whiplash* before he discovered his final frontier.) Derham captures evocatively the way Australians, Americans, and others came together to produce new versions of the West in mid-century Oz.

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May 2022

NOTE

1. See Rachel Leket-Mor, “IsraPulp: The Israeli Popular Literature Collection at Arizona State University,” *Judaica Librarianship* 16 (2011), 1–53; Ch. Didier Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016); and Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, eds. *International Westerns: Re-Locating the Frontier* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2014).

CONTENTS

1	<i>Kangaroo: The Australian Story</i>	1
	<i>The Producers</i>	2
	<i>The Script</i>	5
	<i>The Stars</i>	8
	<i>The Story</i>	14
	<i>Woolundunga</i>	19
	<i>Heat, Willy-Willies, and Flies</i>	24
	<i>Terra Nullius</i>	26
	<i>Zanuckville</i>	32
	<i>The Critics</i>	37
2	<i>Hopalong Cassidy on Tour</i>	49
	<i>Darwin Airport</i>	50
	<i>Darwin Schools</i>	55
	<i>Royal Children's Hospital</i>	63
	<i>Yooralla</i>	66
	<i>Victorian School for Deaf Children</i>	68
	<i>Wirth's Circus</i>	70
	<i>Merchandising</i>	76
	<i>So Long, Pardner</i>	84

3	<i>Whiplash</i>	91
	<i>The American Star</i>	92
	<i>The Graveses in Australia</i>	97
	<i>The Writers</i>	101
	<i>The Producers</i>	105
	<i>The Actors and Actresses</i>	110
	<i>Presenting Aboriginal Culture</i>	114
	<i>Danger!</i>	120
	<i>The Horses and Stagecoaches</i>	123
	<i>The Studio and the Set</i>	125
	<i>The Critics</i>	130
	<i>The Author</i>	131
	Index	139

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Producer Robert Bassler (<i>left</i>) and director Lewis Milestone	3
Fig. 1.2	Richard Boone as John W. Gamble (<i>left</i>) and Peter Lawford as Richard Connor	10
Fig. 1.3	Maureen O’Hara as Del McGuire on her horse	13
Fig. 1.4	Finlay Currie as Michael McGuire	14
Fig. 1.5	The thirsty Aborigines meet the McGuires with their thirsty cattle at a water trough	18
Fig. 1.6	John Endean’s sketch of Connor and Gamble searching Michael McGuire	19
Fig. 1.7	The homestead built for <i>Kangaroo</i> on Woolundunga Station	22
Fig. 1.8	A four-inch double-headed nail	23
Fig. 1.9	George Westenhiser (<i>right</i>) spraying Maureen O’Hara with DDT	25
Fig. 1.10	Poster for <i>Kangaroo</i> showing marauding kangaroos	29
Fig. 1.11	Zanuckville, Port Augusta, South Australia (c.1950)	32
Fig. 1.12	Miss <i>Kangaroo</i> , Loretta North, and Joey	37
Fig. 2.1	William Boyd (<i>centre</i>) and the 44 American newspaper boys about to depart for England	51
Fig. 2.2	Two sides of a Hopalong Cassidy good luck token	53
Fig. 2.3	William Boyd (<i>centre</i>) and Matthias Ulungura (<i>right</i>) at St Mary’s Presbytery	58
Fig. 2.4	Royal Children’s Hospital staff craning to see Hopalong Cassidy	65
Fig. 2.5	Ben Lewin (<i>centre</i>) pointing his toy gun at Hopalong Cassidy	67
Fig. 2.6	Hopalong Cassidy arriving at the Victorian School for Deaf Children	69
Fig. 2.7	William Boyd (<i>arrow</i>) calls for calm at Wirth’s Circus	74
Fig. 2.8	Hoppy Cola bottle	78

Fig. 2.9	Hopalong Cassidy Game manufactured by W. Owen Pty. Ltd.	79
Fig. 2.10	Hoppy Belt Pouch (<i>left</i>) and Hopalong Cassidy Ranch Toffees tin	81
Fig. 2.11	(<i>Clockwise</i>) Hopalong Cassidy Vegemite, Tim Tams, sunscreen and boomerang	83
Fig. 3.1	Freeman Cobb (<i>left</i>) and Peter Graves as Chris Cobb	93
Fig. 3.2	Chris Cobb and his stockwhip from <i>Whiplash Painting Book</i> (n.d.)	95
Fig. 3.3	Houses and shops in Avalon Beach (c.1960)	99
Fig. 3.4	Michael Plant (<i>left</i>) and Michael Noonan	101
Fig. 3.5	Peter Graves as Chris Cobb with a koala	105
Fig. 3.6	Bren Brown, Maury Geraghty, Ross Wood, and Bob Wright (<i>clockwise</i>)	106
Fig. 3.7	Ken Goodlet as Mick Jacky (<i>left</i>) and Anthony Wickert as Dan Ledward	110
Fig. 3.8	Chips Rafferty as Sorrel (<i>left</i>) and Peter Graves as Chris Cobb on the set of “The Adelaide Arabs”	113
Fig. 3.9	The Alice Springs Hotel (c.1959)	115
Fig. 3.10	Reg Livermore as Maloomba (<i>left</i>) and Peter Graves as Chris Cobb in “The Legacy”	117
Fig. 3.11	Anthony Wickert as Dan Ledward (<i>left</i>) and Peter Graves as Chris Cobb driving a stagecoach	125
Fig. 3.12	Workmen constructing Fury Creek (1959)	127
Fig. 3.13	Shops at the Pioneer Settlement, Swan Hill, Victoria (1970s)	129