

RESEARCHERS' TALES – PAM COOK

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1. *I Know Where I'm Going!* (BFI Film Classics series)

I'm going to talk first about the research process for my BFI Film Classic, Powell and Pressburger's 1945 Scottish romance *I Know Where I'm Going* [abbreviated as *IKWIG*]. The project took much longer than anticipated -- the book was commissioned in 1995 and I completed the research and wrote more than half the book in 4 months during a period of study leave in 1997. However, due to life events, I was unable to complete it until 2001. As it happened, the long gestation period was good for me, because during that time my research had taken a direction that fed into the *IKWIG* project. Through my work on the British studio Gainsborough Pictures, I became interested in the links between the British film industry and continental Europe, and in the impact of émigré European film-makers on British cinema. At the same time, research into transnational cultural exchange and the cultural significance of migration and memory came to the fore in the Humanities in the mid- to late-1990s. Powell and Pressburger and their international creative team are significant examples of émigré film-making in Britain. Perhaps more important, the research that had been done previously on *IKWIG* had relied heavily on the memories of those who worked on the film, and on the testimony of fans, some of whom were inspired to follow the journey of the film's strong-willed heroine Joan Webster into the magical world of the Scottish Highlands. These areas formed the basis of my approach: the impact of European émigrés, not just on the industry but on the aesthetics of British cinema; and the way that memory might provide a useful way of approaching and analysing the film.

The general brief for the BFI Film Classics is to analyse a single film in its historical context. The books involve extensive empirical investigation into the conditions from which the film emerged, both social and industrial. My starting point was the film text itself: I watched it several times during the research process, because it's important to get the details as right as possible. And, of course, there are often different versions, and the differences between them can radically affect the meaning. In my opinion, the film is a primary source material that always bears the marks of its immediate context. However, it also reaches beyond that context: to the past, which also leaves its mark on the text; and to the present, to the different contexts of those who see it, and in some cases go on to research and write about it. I believe it's the responsibility of historians to respect the multiple contexts that give a film meaning, and to pay attention to the influence of their own context and agenda on their analysis.

In the case of *IKWIG*, when I began the project, there were 4 viewing copies available: the BFI 35mm print; the BFI Connoisseur video, taken from that print; the Criterion Collection laser disc; and the BBC2 television copy, which I recorded off-air. Later, Criterion produced a DVD version with extra materials, effectively the same as their laser disc version. So all in all I looked at 5 viewing copies, with some surprising results. I watched the BFI 35mm print first, and was immediately struck by how dark it looked, and how low-key much of the lighting was. This led me to speculate that the film's dark, gothic dimension was prominent, and that there may have been a film noir influence. The BFI Connoisseur video was equally dark, which reinforced my speculation. But then I was lucky enough to gain access, with the help of my colleague Ian Christie, to the Criterion laser disc, which was almost like viewing a different film. The lighting was more complex than the BFI print led one to expect, and the low-key gothic dimension, though certainly there, was far less prominent. If I remember correctly -- and I learned how unreliable memory can

be while researching this film -- the master print was owned by BBC2, who had consulted the film's cinematographer Erwin Hillier about the grading of it, so that the copy screened on BBC2 television was as close as possible to the film-makers' intentions. I believe it was that BBC2 print that Criterion used for its laser disc (and the later DVD copy) and Criterion too consulted Erwin Hillier about the grading. The BFI Connoisseur video was discontinued some time ago, and no DVD copy has ever been made available by the BFI, perhaps because the Criterion production pre-empted that.

The Criterion laser disc and DVD had some wonderful extra materials, many of them courtesy of Thelma Schoonmaker Powell, who owns Michael Powell's collection of papers. It also included secondary documentary material and a commentary to the film by Ian Christie. All of this was extremely helpful, not least because it made it clear how important the film was, and is, in a very personal sense, to many people -- not just to the film-makers and those close to them, but to those who have fallen under its spell subsequently. This was quite daunting -- I not only had to find something new to say about a much-loved film, but I also had to do it justice. This realisation influenced the way I chose to write the book, on the model of a journey, with digression built in to the episodic structure, as a homage to those involved in its production who were migrants, and whose memories I tried to trace through the film's aesthetic and narrative structure. This was also my way of making my own personal response to the film, and my involvement in the project visible. I wanted to produce an analysis that revealed the film as made up of multiple layers of meaning deriving from different contexts.

Once I had viewed the different versions of the film, the next step was to find out what others had said or written about it. Despite *IKWIG* being one of Powell and Pressburger's best-loved films, there was little critical or academic writing about it. There was, of course,

Michael Powell's autobiography *A Life in Movies* (1986), which included quite a bit of reminiscence about the film. And there was Kevin Macdonald's biography of his grandfather *Emeric Pressburger: Life and Death of a Screenwriter* (1993), which charted Pressburger's involvement in *IKWIG* and gave additional information about the production. Macdonald's book became an inspiration. The more I read about Pressburger's background and his experiences as an émigré film-maker, the more I became convinced that his contribution to the production had emerged from those experiences, and by the end of the project I came to see *IKWIG* as an émigrés' film. The story set in a mythical Scotland appealed to the nostalgia for a lost homeland among the North American Scottish émigrés (identified as a target audience in the US press campaign book), seen through the eyes of European émigré film-makers working in Britain in the 1940s. In the course of my research, the role played by émigrés in the production took on greater prominence.

I also viewed several documentaries about Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, the most important of which was Mark Cousins' 1994 film for BBC Scotland, *I Know Where I'm Going! Revisited*, which drew extensively on interviews with people involved in the production, with Powell and Pressburger experts, with fans such as Martin Scorsese and with the American Nancy Franklin, whose journey to the Isle of Mull to explore the origins of *IKWIG* features in the documentary. It was this that inspired me to explore the role of memory in writing the history of *IKWIG*, and I'll come back to that later.

Apart from these sources, I found little in the way of secondary material that dealt specifically with the film, although there was some valuable background material, including Ian Christie's writing on Powell and Pressburger and Geoffrey Macnab's *J Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (1993), which provided information about the industrial context in 1940s Britain in which Powell and Pressburger

were working. Because of my interest in visual design, I also drew on work by scholars that dealt with the contribution of émigrés to British production design and cinematography, and on my own work about British costume design in the 1940s.

By far the most exciting part of my research was my investigation of primary materials, which led to a revision of my earlier approach. The BFI Library held a wide range of contemporary documents that were absolutely invaluable, from Emeric Pressburger's hand-written first draft of the script, to articles in the trade press debating the state of British cinema, to the British and American press campaign books, to Eric Britton's novelisation of the film. I mentioned earlier that the influence of Kevin Macdonald's book about his grandfather and the documentary *I Know Where I'm Going! Revisited* led me to investigate the role of memory in the film, and with that in mind I approached the cinematographer Erwin Hillier, a German expatriate living in London, and Wendy Hiller, who plays the wilful, materialistic heroine Joan Webster, for interviews. Both were elderly, and have since died -- in the case of Wendy Hiller, who was very frail, I spoke to her first over the telephone, and then at her request sent written questions, to which she responded in writing. I had several telephone conversations with Erwin Hillier, which I was able to record, thanks to a pre-digital answerphone that used miniature tapes. He was extremely helpful, to the extent of sending me several large packages of memorabilia, including photocopied documents about his career and original photographs taken during *IKWIG*'s production on location and on the Denham studio sets (I believe there was a stills photographer present, since photographs appear in the Criterion Collection DVD extra materials -- however, those items remain with Thelma Schoonmaker Powell and are not available to the public). The photographs loaned to me by Erwin Hillier included stills that showed the special effects work at Denham studios that form such an important part of the film. He also sent me

his archive of press clippings, a collection of everything written about the film and a veritable treasure trove of contemporary critical response.

In our telephone interviews, Erwin Hillier corrected some of my preconceptions -- for instance, he insisted that the film was intended to be a light-hearted fairytale, and cast doubt on the dark gothic film noir influences that I had detected. He also contradicted some of the things said by Michael Powell in his autobiography -- particularly those claiming credit for some of the cinematography and special effects. I'd also come across some contradictions between Michael Powell's account of the making of the film and that given by Kevin Macdonald in his book about Emeric Pressburger. What emerged from this was a strong sense of the contested nature of historical reconstruction, particularly when cultural recognition is at stake. But rather than leading to the conclusion that all history is loaded, or relative, this led me to think that the processes of memory could somehow be written in to historical accounts, so that oral history and the testimony of witnesses would not be taken for granted, but would be used to reflect on the task of writing history itself.

Something that happened in my interview with Wendy Hiller reinforced this perception. I wanted to analyse the costume in the film -- partly because it was referred to in several sources, and it seemed to have some symbolic role in the film. However, no costume designer was credited. This was not necessarily unusual, since costume often came under the general heading of production design (in this case, the magisterial Alfred Junge), and *IKWIG* had a contemporary setting so that the actors may well have used their own clothes. But I was intrigued by the playful references to the Scottish kilt in the film and in the Criterion Collection DVD materials, and by the significance of Joan Webster's wedding dress in the narrative. I asked Wendy Hiller if she knew who did the costume in the film, and at first she replied that she had worn her own clothes. When pressed

on the matter of the wedding dress, however, she responded with 'Elizabeth Haffenden'. Now, this is one of those moments that researchers dream of, when something new and unexpected emerges as a result of empirical investigation. I was highly intrigued: I had done some work on Elizabeth Haffenden, who was Head of Costume at Gaumont-British from 1942 and had designed the elaborate period clothes for the Gainsborough costume melodramas. There was absolutely no evidence in anything I had seen that Haffenden had worked on *IKWIG*, although she had worked with Powell and Pressburger on *The Spy in Black* (1939) and participated in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940). At the time *IKWIG* was made she was at the height of her career, and it seemed unlikely that she would be involved, especially uncredited. To try to clarify things, I wrote to Thelma Schoonmaker Powell to ask if there was anything in Michael Powell's papers to suggest that Haffenden worked on the costume. I received a reply after I'd finished the book to the effect that nothing had been found. I also asked Erwin Hillier whether he remembered Elizabeth Haffenden's involvement, and he replied in the affirmative (he also remembered Haffenden's partner Joan Bridge being there). Hillier claimed that Haffenden designed the blonde wig that Wendy Hiller wears in the dream sequence aboard the Glasgow Express.

This left me in a quandary: on one hand, the memories of those involved in the making of *IKWIG* had played a significant role in constructing the film's history, and deserved to be taken seriously. On the other hand, in this case at least, there was no way of substantiating the veracity or otherwise of those memories. If those memories were taken to be false, or misleading, then how did that reflect on the testimony of others involved in the production, which for the most part had been taken at face value? In the end I included this episode as a reflection on the task of writing history, leaving it to stand as a question mark at the heart of the book.

My experience of researching and writing about *IKWIG* taught me something about the impact that empirical research can have on the historian's preconceptions, and how it can change the direction of a project. But it also taught me that empirical investigation may raise questions without necessarily providing answers. In the end I believe it is up to the historian to provide an account that is open-ended enough to allow for uncertainty and the possibility that historical truth is not necessarily available.

2. Baz Luhrmann (BFI World Directors series)

I'd like to finish by talking briefly about my current research project: a book about Australian director Baz Luhrmann for the BFI World Directors series. Like the BFI Film Classics, these are books that combine close textual and contextual analysis, and depend heavily on empirical research. When I began the project, Baz Luhrmann was internationally famous for three films, collectively known as The Red Curtain Trilogy: *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* (199), and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). He is currently shooting a historical epic titled *Australia*, dealing with a little-known episode in the country's history, starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman and due for release towards the end of 2008.

In order to research Luhrmann's work, I had to go to Australia -- the BFI has a good collection of relevant reviews and academic articles, much of it from Australian sources, but I wanted to interview Luhrmann and his chief collaborator and partner, designer Catherine Martin, and I needed to find out what primary materials existed in Australian libraries and archives. The interview material will form a key part of the book. As with my *IKWIG* project, my Luhrmann research led me down some unfamiliar paths, and changed my approach in several ways. I'll focus here on what I learned from the interviews.

It is unusual for high-profile directors to be accessible to academics. To my surprise, Baz Luhrmann granted me two two-hour interviews at his Bazmark company production base in Sydney in June 2005. I already knew a little about this set-up from a BBC documentary by Adrian Sibley that included a tour of the premises. In the documentary, Sibley compared the set-up to Frances Ford Coppola's in the US. One of the things I've noticed about non-Australian accounts of Baz Luhrmann is the impulse to place him and his work within the American context -- indeed, though *Strictly Ballroom* is perceived as an Australian film, both *Romeo+Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge!*, which were funded by 20th Century Fox, are generally thought of as American, even though the personnel who worked on them were primarily Australian, and post-production was carried out almost entirely in Australia, with Bazmark playing a major role. A colleague of mine remarked to me recently that Luhrmann was simply a subsidiary of Fox. Bazmark has a first-look deal with Fox that has lasted many years, with some adjustments, and is going strong today (Fox is funding Baz's film *Australia*.)

My visit to the Sydney Bazmark premises, where I was given the guided tour, and my interviews with Baz Luhrmann and Catherine Martin, gave me an entirely different perspective on their situation. The building, which is located in a colonial mansion that once belonged to the Duke of Westminster, who owns extensive property in Australia and around the world, has been transformed into a bohemian-style living and working space, rather like an artist's studio. I would describe this set-up as artisanal, with Fox acting as Luhrmann's sponsors. Luhrmann described his relationship with Fox as one that allows him creative autonomy, and he claimed that he and Catherine Martin had deliberately and strategically set out to acquire 'creative capital' (my term) that would give them serious negotiating power with the Hollywood studios. Out of all the studios that pursued them after the success of *Strictly Ballroom* at Cannes, Fox

was the only one that agreed to their demand for creative autonomy. Luhrmann claims that they could have become seriously wealthy by signing with one of the other major studios, but chose to forgo this in order to keep their artistic independence.

We should bear in mind the lessons I learned from my IKWIG research about taking the testimony of film-makers, or anyone else, at face value. Nevertheless, my contact with Luhrmann and Martin and my visit to their production base gave me insight into their Australian context that changed my perception of them as independent film-makers. Luhrmann described Fox as curators who take care of the business side of things so that the Luhrmanns are free to manage the creative process of film-making. The 'first look' arrangement means that Luhrmann can depend on extended development, shooting and post-production periods for his films (for example, *Australia*'s release in 2008 will be seven years after the release of the last production *Moulin Rouge!*; the only film to be produced in the interim is the 2004 3-minute Chanel No. 5 advertisement, starring Nicole Kidman, that's doing the rounds on British television at the moment).

To me, the Bazmark-Fox deal seems different from other deals between independent outfits and the Hollywood studios, where the logic seems to be that independents are swallowed up by the major companies -- see, for example, Working Title and Universal -- with an apparently inevitable impact on the independents' output. The Bazmark-Fox deal seems to rest on the agreement between both parties that this will not happen, and that Bazmark will continue to retain artistic autonomy (though it must be said that Fox currently retains copyright on all their productions, including the DVD versions). My project will investigate the extent to which this arrangement is possible because of Bazmark's Australian context. All in all, my research in Australia gave me a different perspective on the national identity of Luhrmann and his films and their

reception/perception in different national contexts. I started out thinking of his work and production methods as 'global', i.e. with no fixed address, but now perceive the Australian context to be more important than I initially supposed.

This seems an appropriate point to make a link with my *IKWIG* research. The production set-up for Luhrmann's films has something in common with those of Powell and Pressburger: both depend on a collaborative working ethos, based on artistic autonomy supported by a sponsor (British movie magnate J. Arthur Rank in the case of *The Archers*). In my *IKWIG* research, I identified *The Archers*' collaborative working methods with those in place at the German studio UFA in the 1920s and 30s, where many of the European émigrés had worked, and contrasted it with the more hierarchical methods of Hollywood. In the case of my Luhrmann project, I started out with a similar assumption that Bazmark's working ethos was based on European models rather than on Hollywood ones. I now think that this assumption is too simple, and that the opposition between Hollywood studios and independent production is probably untenable. I would rather work with the idea that each production set-up is specific to its historical context, and cannot be contained within abstract or stereotypical models. While I may make links with other times and places in approaching Luhrmann's work, I shall treat it as specific to the Australian industrial context, and to a particular group of film-makers working within it.

I've outlined here some of the ways in which empirical research has influenced and transformed my approach to my projects -- though in both cases it has not provided clear-cut answers. Researchers often go into their research looking for evidence that will support a predetermined thesis. In my case, the evidence, or lack of it, and its often uncertain status, has led me not only to revise my preconceptions, but to try to write histories that acknowledge the open-ended nature of history itself. © Pam Cook 2007