

Reel Schools



Schooling and the Nation
in Australian Cinema

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is the result of an obsession. I wouldn't go so far as to call it a 'magnificent obsession' but it has certainly been a constant one now for a number of years. In looking for an interesting research project in the History of Australian Education utilising visual evidence, I thought of the many fine Australian films featuring schools, one of the first among them, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir, 1971). This started speculation about the meaning and purpose of the school in the numerous quality school films of the 1970s Australian film revival. I then began to look at other decades and to make a list – a sure sign of obsession taking hold. I noticed the ubiquity of schools in Australian films either as main or ancillary components. What could this presence mean? How far back in Australian film making history did it go? I turned to the historical and critical literature to help me understand the role of the school and schooling in Australian cinema, to find that the topic was not addressed in any sustained manner. There was an absence at the heart of this almost continuous presence of the school film. This absence of scholarly investigation was particularly the case for historians of Australian education who had not systematically engaged with the visual realm as evidence until recent years. So there it is – something interesting was going on in Australian film regarding schools and schooling. *Reel Schools* is my answer to the question: what does it mean when filmmakers represent the Australian school, and its essential personnel of teachers and students, on film?

Some of the material in this book has been drawn from journal articles published over the years as the project developed. Three articles were published by Taylor & Francis Ltd (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>): 'A Field of Desire: Selected Images of Education in Australian Silent Film' (*Pedagogica Historica* 2010) utilised in Chapter 2; 'The disenchantment of childhood: exploring the cultural and spatial boundaries of childhood in three Australian feature films, 1920s–1970s' (*Pedagogica Historica* 2007) in Chapter 3; and 'A challenging

vision: the teacher-student relationship in *The Heartbreak Kid* (*Journal of Australian Studies*, 2009) in chapter 8. Two articles were published in *History of Education Review* (Emerald Publishers): 'Imagining the Secondary School: the "pictorial turn" and representations of secondary schools in two Australian feature films of the 1970s' (*History of Education Review* 2006) in Chapter 4; and material from 'Puberty Blues and the Representation of an Australian Comprehensive High School' (*History of Education Review* 2008) is included in Chapter 6. I also reproduced some material in Chapter 5 from my article, 'Insistent bodies versus the Rule: the representation of male sexualities and gender identities in *The Devil's Playground*' in *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* (2006). Full details are in the bibliography.

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Dr Josephine May,
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