chapter 3

good mother, bad mother and the changing boundaries

The mothering of a child is not something that can be arranged by rota; it is a live human relationship which alters the characters of both partners.¹

Traditionally, the good mother has been associated with self-sacrifice. An extract from a Catholic education course on marriage in 1958 illustrates the point:

To successfully fulfil her vocation of motherhood, the woman should possess great qualities of heart. Her entire life should be devoted to procuring happiness for those around her…It is natural for her to be devoted.²

This view of motherhood assigns women to a subservient position. It does not take into account the changing structure of the family, and instead, creates an environment which reinforces the belief that the mother's place is within the home, and primarily concerned with raising the children.

The restrictive maternal role is endorsed in part by images in films which have the capacity to both reflect and influence ways of thinking. This chapter considers the representation of the mother in Australian feature films to decipher the way in which the narrative characterises good and bad maternal behaviour. The introductory chapter of this research contained a broad overview of historical events which were significant for the maternal role. The present chapter, in its first section, deals in more detail with those aspects which relate directly to expectations of good mothering. The second section of the chapter examines the way the mother is depicted in films. The designation of her as either a good or bad mother can be determined by her demeanour, the attitude of others towards her and, perhaps, above all, by her treatment in the narrative in terms of penalties or benefits reaped by her behaviour. As the chapter attempts to evaluate the changing

boundaries of the maternal role, it is crucial to understand the portrayal of the mother in films in relation to the milestones in social history which are revealed in part one.

**Good Mothering in Australia**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, twelve babies died out of every one hundred births. As well, women were having fewer children and the birthrate had fallen from 42.6 per thousand in the mid-nineteenth century to 27 per thousand in 1900. Concern for Australia's falling population sparked a Royal Commission in 1903. The state's interest in women's maternal role, became, as Sol Encel declared: 'the single most important factor bearing upon the position of women in a modern industrial society.' Much of the official blame for infant mortality, according to Claudia Knapman in her research on early childhood, was attributed to maternal ignorance of child health, and in particular, poor hygiene practices. The dictum 'Where there's dirt there's danger' became entrenched in society. Mothering practices were spotlighted and good mothers came to be seen as agents of cleanliness.

Another aspect of the good mother's role, according to state policies, was her duty as an Australian citizen. Responsible for producing law-abiding adults in society, she was also expected to make her sons available to fight in wars. The onset of the First World War in 1914 and the call for Australian men to enlist, highlighted the contradiction in the mothering role. On the one hand, she was to devote her life to her children's welfare, and on the other, she was to encourage her sons to join up and risk their lives. The maternal predicament of whether a good mother upholds her duty to the state, or protects her child above all else, must also be confronted by women with lawbreaking progeny. The situation was a common focus of film narratives.

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5Encel et al., *Women and Society*, p. 20.
6Knapman, 'Reconstructing Mothering', p. 113.
7Knapman, 'Reconstructing Mothering', p. 113, quoting an undated Royal Far West Children's Health Scheme article 'The wise woman'.
Apart from specific conflicts between her citizenship and her family which arose from time to time, the mother's role after the First World War was scarcely different from the period beforehand. Unceasingly expected to sacrifice their own desires for the good of the family, most women accepted that marriage and children meant a life of domesticity. Baby Health Centres were opened in the rapidly expanding suburbs in the 1920s, and trained nurses taught mothers how to provide for the physical health of their children. Kerreen Reiger noted that although there had been demands for women to be 'spotless housewives and perfect mothers' for many years, the new 'scientific mothering' urged the management of children with 'regularity, cleanliness and efficiency'. Women read popular magazines such as *Everylady's Journal*. Filled with articles on housekeeping hints, these magazines offered advice about child-rearing and the mothering process. Even so, Reiger indicated that there was a certain freedom in the mother's life during the 1920s, because there was less concern about separate roles for men and women. Reiger reported, for example, that women laboured beside their men on the family farms without compromising ideas of their own femininity.

The boundaries for good mothering shifted in the 1930s, as a consequence of the hardships brought by the Depression. By law, women were paid less than men and were often able to get work, albeit in menial positions. They were pilloried, however, for taking men's jobs. Economic deprivation had resulted in a further fall of the birth rate and the desire to keep women out of the workforce and encourage them to have more children, served to reinforce the division in the male and female role. Many mothers must have found it a confusing and distressing period. While officially and publicly they were to

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8Women in other countries experienced changes because they were closer to the conflict and were living in more industrialised societies than Australia according to Encel et al., *Women and Society*, p. 20.
13The birth rate fell to 16.6 per thousand during the Depression. Encel et al., *Women and Society*, p. 19.
retain their femininity and dependence within the home, their desire, in a decade of financial instability, was to ensure that the family was clothed and had sufficient to eat.\footnote{For a moving account of the humiliation that women felt trying to cope with food rationing, see Kay Daniels & Mary Murnane, \textit{Australia's Women: A Documentary History}, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Queensland, 1989, p. 301.}

After the Second World War, although the move to the suburbs and improvement to the economy brought changes to the family, the requirement for the good mother to be devoted to the children intensified. The advice of child-rearing experts at the time promoted the idea that any problems of the child were a consequence of bad mothering. According to the 'theory of mother-blame', the mother must be constantly with her children, ready to answer their every need. John Bowlby, an influential psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, advised the mother against going out to work so that her baby could experience 'a warm, intimate, and \textit{continuous} relationship with his mother...in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment'.\footnote{Bowlby, \textit{Child Care and the Growth of Love}, p.13. [my italics].} His contemporary, the psychoanalyst and paediatrician, D.W. Winnicott, who advocated 'good enough mothering' was, perhaps, not as inflexible as Bowlby. His insistence that the mother must always put the child's interests first, however, set parameters that were restrictive and in many ways impossible to achieve.\footnote{D. W. Winnicott, \textit{Playing and Reality}, Tavistock, London, 1971, p. 10, from a paper written in 1951.}

The mother's situation altered considerably from the 1970s, when large numbers of women found paid employment. Sol Encel determined that 42\% of the increase in the labour force at the time was composed of married women.\footnote{Encel et al., \textit{Women and Society}, p. 75.} Additionally, sociologist and commentator, Eva Cox, reported that by the middle of 1977, almost half of the mothers of children under twelve years old were working outside the home.\footnote{Eva Cox, 'Beware the Call of Nature', \textit{Social Alternatives}, volume 1, number 3, 1978, p. 69.} Despite the change in lifestyle which foreshadowed an identity distinct from motherhood, women retained primary responsibility for their children. Lyn Richards, in her research on the social pressure on parenting in Australia in the late 1970s, commented that men were rarely involved directly in the child rearing process.\footnote{Lyn Richards, \textit{Having Families: Marriage, Parenthood and Social Pressure in Australia}, Penguin,} The good mother was expected to be...
devoted to her children as well as maintaining a career. The difficulties that women faced found sympathy with feminists in the growing women's movement.

Idealised versions of good mothering persisted despite women's responsibilities in the workplace and increased self-confidence and financial independence. In a case study of one hundred and fifty Sydney suburban mothers in the 1980s, Betsy Wearing found that the good mother was defined as someone who was always accessible to her children, and who cared calmly and without anger for their physical and emotional state.\(^{20}\) When Jan Harper and Lyn Richards asked sixty young Australian couples to outline the qualities of good mothers, they described women who were devoted to their children. As well, they 'were always there, passive, patient, unselfish, good listeners'.\(^{21}\) Stephanie Brown, Rhonda Small and Judith Lumley concluded from their research project involving Australian families in the 1990s, that a good mother was held to be 'caring, loving, patient, calm, relaxed, one who listens and talks to her children'.\(^{22}\) The good mother that these respondents discussed was the time-honoured, unselfish individual who neglected her own needs.

The often-espoused notion that good mothers are self-sacrificing, devoted and passive is central to the prevailing ideology on maternal behaviour. In the last decades of the twentieth century, when the maternal role has changed so much, its endorsement by the mothers themselves is, perhaps, surprising. According to recent research by Susan Maushart, women colluded with 'the mask of motherhood' as she described it, which she saw as a conspiracy to keep silent about the realities of the mothering experience in order to allow men to maintain their 'privileged status quo'. Maushart made it clear that the 'supermum' of the 1980s did not exist, that women struggled in silence to be good

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mothers, assuming all the while that any difficulties were their own responsibility and a mark of their shortcomings.\textsuperscript{23}

The myth of the selflessly devoted good mother has been supported by images in popular culture. In discussing American films, E. Ann Kaplan concluded that their representations promulgated an ideology of motherhood which perpetuated 'oppressive patriarchal myths'.\textsuperscript{24} Psychologist Jan Swigart drew attention to 'grossly distorted images' which dichotomised the maternal role and allowed no room for the inherent ambivalences in bringing up children. Swigart argued that loving, generous, good mothers who had no serious problems were frequently set against images of selfish, abusive mothers who did irreparable damage to the child.\textsuperscript{25} Representations of mothers 'just like you and me' except that they were perfect, as psychotherapist, Joyce Block showed, drew attention to an insidious side of the media.\textsuperscript{26} Stereotypical depictions of the good mother were impossible to achieve in real life. These diverse studies focused on overseas images of the mother. The way in which Australian films depicted the maternal role is set out in part two below.

The Good and Bad Mother in Films

The narratives of early Australian feature films focused on bushranging, gold prospecting or the early settlement of the Colony. Concerned predominantly with male activities in the public sphere, the films depicted the mother generally confined to the home. The few meagre images remaining from the early days of the cinema typically showed the mother as a sturdy, respectable, middle-aged figure who was publicly powerless. Her tied back long hair complemented an apron-covered dark shapeless dress with a demure neckline. The apron was an important accessory which signified the mother's unending commitment to domestic cleanliness. The image suggested that mothers were nurturers, cleaners and

\textsuperscript{26}Joyce Block, \textit{Motherhood as Metamorphosis: Change and Continuity in the Life of a New Mother}, Dutton, NY, 1990, p. 150, p. 158.
carers, devoted to domestic pursuits and to keeping everything in its place. In early cinema until World War Two, mothers were rarely seen without an apron or away from the kitchen, where they laboured unceasingly at their domestic chores.

In an era when cleanliness was next to godliness, the mother's responsibility for the hygiene of the family was enhanced by her saintly image. The spiritual head of the family, she ensured that her daughters attended church and conducted themselves in a seemly manner. She had no apparent similar influence on male family members, and indeed, frequently, as in Kenneth Brampton's *Robbery Under Arms* (1920), her progeny were involved in a life of crime. Despite her sons' behaviour, she retained her close association with religion. For instance, in an early scene of *Robbery Under Arms*, the mother is in the kitchen preparing Christmas dinner, when she hears her sons — partners of the notorious Captain Starlight — approaching on horseback. She immediately turns to a crucifix on the wall and the intertitle tells us that she intones: 'Mother of mercy has heard my pleas and brought my boys back to me'.27 Another intertitle is used to emphasise the religious component of her selfless maternal role: *And this was the Xmas Day that big unselfish heart had prayed for*. Later, when her sons have left, the police arrive and demand to be told their whereabouts. She hesitates, then reluctantly acquiescing, lifts her arm to point the way. A god-fearing woman, however hard it would have been for her not to try to protect her sons, her maternal loyalty was outweighed by her duty to the church and the state. Within the film, the good citizen-mother was rewarded with a happy ending, though only after her sons had served time in jail.

The mother in some films, however, reacted differently to the predicament of her duty to the state and to her own flesh and blood. In the many films about Ned Kelly and his gang, the mother resists the police in order to help her renegade son avoid capture.28 In Harry Southwell's *The Kelly Gang* (1920), *When the Kellys Were Out* (1923) and *When the Kellys Rode* (1934), the mother is considered by some to be the first long feature film in the world. It has been lost, though a few precious minutes of the film were discovered in 1977 in Melbourne. Unfortunately the fragments did not include the

27The association with the Roman Catholic church was clear. There was a class difference within the films, where the poor Catholic/Irish outlaws were contrasted with the righteous Protestant/English police.
28These included Charles Tait's *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906), Harry Southwell's *The Kelly Gang* (1920), *When the Kellys Were Out* (1923) and *When the Kellys Rode* (1934). *The Story of the Kelly Gang* is considered by some to be the first long feature film in the world. It has been lost, though a few precious minutes of the film were discovered in 1977 in Melbourne. Unfortunately the fragments did not include the
Southwell's *When the Kellys Were Out* (1923), Mrs Kelly, playing her part without having to leave her domestic space, picks up a frying pan and attempts to hit the investigating constable over the head. This was sufficient to cause a diversion and delay the hapless policeman while her son escaped. These films, perhaps, followed the true story of Ellen Kelly, the mother of Ned.\(^{29}\) Arrested in 1878, she was imprisoned for three years for assisting her son.\(^{30}\) On the screen, the mother's attempt to save her sons was ultimately unsuccessful and the outlaws were always captured and imprisoned. The films recognised the mother's loyalty, while at the same time reinforcing the notion that requirements of the state for law and order were paramount.

The theme of outdoor adventure of many of the early films curtailed the involvement of the mother.\(^{31}\) Generally cast in a minor role, she was the good woman whose main responsibility was to nurture her family. The focus on male-dominated events in early films changed with the first film of a new director, Raymond Longford, who became one of the greatest and most prolific filmmakers in the early days of Australian cinema.\(^{32}\)

Much has been written about Longford and his partnership with his leading actress, Lottie Lyell. They were inseparable, although they never married as Longford's wife outlived Lyell. Her close association with Longford allowed Lyell to become involved in filmmaking in a way that was unusual for a woman at that time. Indeed, as film historian Andrée Wright recorded, many contemporaries thought that Lottie Lyell had more

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\(^{29}\)The Kelly family's antagonism to authority was apparent in Ned's 'Jerilderie letter' which pointed out his hatred of the mainly Protestant policemen and his claim for rights as an Irishman. See Alastair Davidson, *From Subject to Citizen: Australian Citizenship in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 49.


\(^{31}\)After the success of Tait's *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, many imitators followed, including Charles MacMahon's *Robbery Under Arms* (1907), John Gavin's *Thunderbolt* (1910) and *Ben Hall and his Gang* (1911) and Gaston Mervale's *A Tale of the Australian Bush* (1911). For synopses and details of more bushranging films see Andrew Pike & Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*, Oxford University Press/AFI, Melbourne, 1980.

influence on the films than Longford. The presence of a woman with this type of creative power changed the substance of film narrative in Australia.

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Longford and Lyell on early Australian cinema. Apart from their practice of using a female actor (usually Lottie Lyell) as the principal protagonist, they brought a previously unknown complexity and depth to Australian film narrative. Proficiency in using advanced cinema techniques such as the close-up, and their taste for melodrama, ended the almost unbroken focus on masculine concerns. Perhaps the most important aspect of their work for the representation of mothers in films came about because Lyell was a young woman. Her portrayal of the sprightly, youthful mother marked a change from the matronly, passive figure common in cinema of the time. Additionally, whereas daring exploits in films were usually the province of the male star, in Longford/Lyell productions, Lyell, even when she played the role of mother, was always strong and adventurous. For example in 1911, when other films were concerned with such ostensibly male activities as chasing outlaws and escaped convicts, Longford and Lyell produced The Fatal Wedding.

A synopsis of the film, the print of which unfortunately has been lost, traced the story of the Wilson family, — mother, father and young children, — whose happy and comfortable home life was disrupted by the intervention of a scheming woman. The malicious female ruins the mother's name and precipitates a divorce. Because his wife is now seen as a bad mother, the father is given custody of the children. Not content to submit passively to her fate, however, the innocent mother abducts the children. Living for five years in great poverty, she struggles valiantly to care for her children. By the end of the film she has been able to prove that she is a good mother and she returns to the family home. Mabel Wilson, the mother in The Fatal Wedding perfectly fitted the

34Although he concentrated on Raymond Longford's abilities, see John Tulloch, 'Raymond Longford's The Sentimental Bloke', in A. Moran & T. O'Regan, (eds), *An Australian Film Reader*, Currency, Sydney, 1985, pp. 38-44.
35Lottie Lyell played the mother, Mabel Wilson. Her husband, Howard, was played by Raymond Longford, Pike & Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*, p. 23.
prototype of the good mother: having risked all for her children, her tenacity and capability were rewarded. The Longford/Lyell production ran for an 'unprecedented five weeks',\textsuperscript{36} suggesting that a film which focused on the difficulties of a good mother was a subject which struck a chord with Australian audiences.

Longford and Lyell sustained their interest in family films. In 1912, they made \textit{The Tide of Death}. Longford wrote the story, which in a typically complicated plot, told of the trials and tribulations of a man and woman in the search for happiness. The mother, played by Lottie Lyell, is kidnapped by her step-father and taken from her loving husband and child. However, as in other Longford/Lyell films, the feisty mother does not accept her misfortune and manages to escape from the villain. In what is, perhaps, a metaphorical purification of any sexual misdeeds she has suffered at the kidnapper's hands, she enters a convent. Her demonstrable and undoubted innocence inevitably ensured the return to her rightful place as wife and mother.\textsuperscript{37}

One of the most acclaimed of Longford's films was \textit{On Our Selection}, made in 1920. Lyell, who eventually succumbed to tuberculosis in 1925 at the age of thirty-six, was too ill to act in the film, although, as Wright has pointed out, she probably was involved in scriptwriting and editing.\textsuperscript{38} The figure of the mother, Mrs Rudd, deserves attention because of the long-term popularity and influence of \textit{On Our Selection} in Australian society. The film is also important because it is intact, whereas most other Longford films have been lost or destroyed and can be assessed only from written synopses. \textit{On Our Selection} has been made into a film three times, yet many view the first, the 1920 version, as the best and most representative of Australian rural life.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36}Pike & Cooper, \textit{Australian Film 1900-1977}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{37}The film is lost, for more details of the plot, see Pike & Cooper, \textit{Australian Film 1900-1977}, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{38}Wright, \textit{Brilliant Careers}, p. 108, n. 63.
\textsuperscript{39}Raymond Longford's film in 1920 was the first, followed by Ken G. Hall's film of the same name in 1932. The most recent remake, titled \textit{Dad and Dave's On Our Selection}, was directed by George Whaley in 1994.
In *On Our Selection*, the mother is presented as a virtuous, devoted woman, although she is outside the strictures that good mothering usually implies. Mrs Rudd is introduced with a eulogy which avoids the sacrificial aspect of the traditional good mother:

> The big kind-hearted soul, the light and love of the home, the willing help-mate of us all. Never sad, never selfish, never despairing, never desponding, and ever thoughtful, ever making, ever mending, ever hoping for the better days to come.

This Mrs Rudd is a 'help-mate' rather than a person who is expected to sacrifice everything for her children. In keeping with the good mother's obligation for domestic competence, she keeps the earth-floored bark hut clean and tidy. As well, though, she shares the lifestyle common to many rural women who labour on the property. When there is work to do, she can be found in the fields, sewing corn and working beside her husband and children. Additionally, despite the accolade of the intertitle, Mrs Rudd is shown in the film to be a practical mother who has problems in her life with which the audience could identify. For instance, she reacts angrily when any of her seven children misbehave. She is portrayed from time to time even slapping her youngest child, Joe. Far from being defined as a bad mother because of her anger, Mrs Rudd's status as a good mother is endorsed. Joe's consistent bad behaviour is seen as childish naughtiness rather than evidence of her deficiency and his punishment is an appropriate reaction. In Mrs Rudd, the filmmakers have pointed to the ambivalences of being a mother: to what mothers are supposed to be and what they are in real life.

Longford allowed Mrs Rudd to break out of the traditional 'good mother' mould. She was depicted as having power within the family, which was uncommon in those mothers who more precisely fitted the maternal stereotype of selflessness. Although in general, Mrs Rudd agreed with Dad's prognostications on life, occasionally she managed to defy him. For instance, she was friendly and encouraging to her youngest daughter's suitor, Billy Bearup, despite Dad's banning him from the house. Without the artifice and manipulation

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40 Intertitle used to introduce Mrs Rudd in Raymond Longford's *On Our Selection* (1920).
41 Mrs Rudd was also outside notions of chastity and purity, usually the province of the good mother. See discussion on sexuality and motherhood, chapter 6.
common to wives in later films, she was able eventually to persuade her husband to accept Billy. As well, it was she who was the strength of the family, a position underlined at the wedding of her eldest daughter, Kate, where she happily watched her plans come to fruition, while Dad, perhaps unsure about their future, shed a tear.

In the 1930s, several of the films of the 1920s were remade. A comparison of the mothers in each, highlighted changes the economic conditions of the decade made to the mother-role. A new and sharp division in the roles of men and women could be detected in the films of the 1930s. Women's femininity was paramount and their place was in the home, while outside labour was deemed the man's responsibility. In the earlier films, the mothers retained their good mother status despite their freedom of self-expression. During the 1930s, maternal images reinforced the ideological preference for women's dependence and domesticity.

This change was most clearly demonstrated in an early Australian 'talkie', Ken G. Hall's *On Our Selection*, which was a remake in 1932 of the 1920 Longford film discussed above. Whereas Longford had attempted to follow the original writings of 'Steele Rudd', (Arthur Hoey Davis), Hall used the stage adaptation of the tales of the Rudd family. The later film depended on farcical situations and burlesque humour which, perhaps, were designed to lift the spirits of the audiences during the Depression. For whatever reason, Hall's film strongly contrasted with Longford's approach of relying on the original stories and attempting to portray real problems encountered by poor farmers in rural Australia.

Although most of the players in Hall's film are designed to be amusing caricatures, Mrs Rudd is not a figure of fun. Known as 'Mum', dressed in a long sombre frock and a cap, she is constantly weary. As her primary role is to prepare food, she is distraught when she is unable to provide the visiting parson with a scone for his afternoon tea. When Dad makes an impassioned speech about the spirit of Australia and his vision for the land, Mum stands by, content to support his rhetoric. She is 'heartbroken' when her daughter
decides to leave the farm. Her weakness and passivity are in marked contrast to the stronger Mrs Rudd of the twenties, who worked beside her husband in the fields and was proud of her daughter's independence and accomplishments in the city. Hall's Mrs Rudd, however, was a good mother according to public and official guidelines during the Depression. She knew her place and remained within the home, dependent on her husband.

A similar comparison of the two decades can be made in The Hayseeds, a 1933 Beaumont Smith update of his successful silent films. The synopsis of one of the earlier films, The Hayseeds' Melbourne Cup (1918), discloses that Mum goes with Dad to the Melbourne Cup and behaves as she does on the farm. In what was probably an hilarious scene, resplendent in her rural attire which contrasts with the stylish city fashions, Mum boils a billy for tea on the lawn at Flemington racecourse. It would be difficult to imagine the mother in the 'talkie' remake displaying such enterprise as she was old, tired and ill. In The Hayseeds (1933), the long drought signals the problems of making a living from the land. These are construed, however, as a male responsibility, while the mother's task is restricted to looking after the house. When Dad Hayseed in 1933 discusses the trials of farming with his new 'townie' friend, it is significant that he reveals that his wife has been in bed with lumbago all through winter. Mum appeared to take no active part of farm life and is portrayed as no more than an adjunct to her husband. As with the 1932 Mrs Rudd, Mrs Hayseed is a passive figure who reacts to others, rather than doing anything on her own behalf.

One mother of the decade, although a compliant nurturer, shows a distinguishing talent. In Beaumont Smith's Splendid Fellows (1934), the mother, Mrs McBride, is given a mystical gift of spirituality and healing. Her appearance and behaviour throughout the film belie her celestial abilities, and her remarkable ability is revealed only in the last stages of the film.

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42 These popular rustic characters were featured in: Our Friends the Hayseeds (1911), The Hayseeds Come to Town (1917), The Hayseeds' Melbourne Cup (1918), Townies and Hayseeds (1923) and Prehistoric Hayseeds (1924). They were all directed by Beaumont Smith. None of the silent films survives.
43 Pike & Cooper, Australian Film 1900-1977, p. 98.
narrative. While she is tending to guests at an after-theatre supper, Mrs McBride meets a long-lost blind friend. Revealing her connection to the divine, and probably to the surprise of the guests as well as the audience, she tells him not to be concerned, as God will give him back his sight. Soon after, as he is transported in the Parson's plane, (the Parson of course being God's messenger on earth), the blind soul crashes to the earth and finds that his sight has been miraculously restored.

The mother in *Splendid Fellows* showed a spirituality which, however bizarrely depicted, was in tune with the customary maternal role. In Ken G. Hall's *Mr Chedworth Steps Out* (1939), the mother displayed the opposite characteristics. Mrs Chedworth was a selfish, bad-tempered, insensitive and unkind woman, which were unpardonable sins in a mother. Above all, perhaps, she expressed her own desires in life and, as they fell outside the parameters of the sacrificing good mother role, she was punished for them. The very fine actor, Cecil Kellaway, played Mr Chedworth and made him a very sympathetic figure who was adored by his children. His gentle, sympathetic demeanour contrasted with their shrill and critical mother. Until the final scenes of *Mr Chedworth Steps Out*, the traditional depictions of the parents were reversed. Mrs Chedworth, the mother, was aggressive, non-nurturing and competitive. Mr Chedworth, the father, was loving, submissive and compliant.

The film tells the story of a suburban family in the last year of the Depression, immediately before the outbreak of World War Two. Mr and Mrs Chedworth rent an unpretentious suburban home where they live with their three children, a young man and woman and a bright teenaged daughter who is still at school. In the opening scene of the film, the children and their father are eating breakfast. The setting is inharmonious and cluttered. Because it is traditionally the mother's place, her absence from the kitchen sends an immediate signal that Mrs Chedworth functions outside the usual mothering role. When she finally sweeps into the room, her appearance and behaviour come as a shock, in contrast to the kindly mothers common to the family genre. Unglamorous in hair curlers
and dressing gown, she enters nagging and shrieking at her family. She harps at her husband, making his life miserable as she hectors him to keep up with the neighbours. 'I do wish you had a bit more push in you', she reproaches. Out of his mother's hearing, the son asks his father for help with a gambling debt and they conspire to hide the problem from his mother.\footnote{Interestingly, there was no inference drawn between her bad mothering and the son's behaviour. The son's gambling was structured as his weakness, because the Freudian imperative of mother-blame had not begun to infiltrate the cinema and parents in films were not yet held directly responsible for the children's misdemeanours.}

Although Mrs Chedworth's duties did not include the preparation of breakfast, the film maintains a semblance of normal family life. She stays in the home, while Mr Chedworth goes out to work. As his wife continues to rage, he, quietly resigned, leaves for his dull office job, murmuring pathetically: 'I have to keep going to keep up'. In the subsequent scene, Mr Chedworth's boss thanks him for his many years of work and sacks him. It is a poignant moment, although Mr Chedworth's dismissal marks the beginning of his good fortune and he goes on to make a large sum of money on the stock exchange. Despite his cheerful blundering, everything he touches turns to gold. The delighted Mrs Chedworth joins the \textit{nouveau riche} and is able to buy a suburban mansion.

Success has changed Mr Chedworth. He is now a forceful man and not the acquiescent timid soul he once was. This is signified in the film as he varnishes the floor in the new home. Literally painting himself into a corner, he is forced to re-evaluate his lifestyle. In a plan to punish his wife for her pretensions, he employs an actor to play a bailiff who comes to repossess the furniture. Unkindly, although as a mark of the resumption of his rightful role as head of the family and to reinforce Mrs Chedworth's subordinate place, he arranges for this to happen as she entertains guests at the house-warming party. She is crushed and humiliated. As though serving to underline her punishment, when a mix-up about his wealth is at last resolved and Mr Chedworth celebrates in his palatial new house with his daughters and son, the wife is nowhere to be seen.
Mr Chedworth Steps Out was an important film, because it sent a warning to women, both in its title and final scene, about the requirement for them to observe their traditional self-sacrificing role. It signalled that the men who may have been disempowered during the Depression, would resume their role as income-producer and head of family. Mrs Chedworth was represented as a bad mother with selfish desires. As a punishment, she was not allowed to enjoy the fruits of the family's improved financial position. It is disturbing that the posters advertised the film as a portrayal of 'Mr and Mrs Average Man'. Also worrying was film historian, Graham Shirley's assessment in 1994, describing it as 'the only 1930s feature to reflect the suburban life and aspirations of most Australians'. For Shirley it was unproblematic that mothers like Mrs Chedworth should be treated so cruelly and summarily.

The onset of World War Two ended most feature film production and any interest in motherhood in films. There were only twenty-eight feature films made in Australia during the 1940s. In the first half of the decade, during the war, filming was limited to newsreels, military recruitment and propaganda. The most successful feature films at this time were Charles Chauvel's Forty Thousand Horsemen (1940) and The Rats of Tobruk (1944), both of which concentrated on mateship during war. Production of films with a focus on domestic life did not begin again until the second half of the 1940s. Five family films were produced, and the first of these, in 1946, was Eric Porter's A Son is Born.

A landmark film for the representation of mothers, A Son is Born heralded a departure from the matronly figures of the 1930s and introduced a young attractive actress, Muriel Steinbeck, to play the role of the mother, Laurette. Despite her beauty, devotion to her husband, Paul, and her capable home management, Laurette is unable to prevent Paul's affairs with other women, or his bouts of alcoholism. Hoping that the birth of their son, David, will improve the marriage, Laurette is disappointed when the baby causes further

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46 This is in contrast to eighty nine in the 1920s, fifty in the 1930s and an amazing one hundred and sixty two in the second decade of the century. Pike & Cooper, Australian Film 1900-1977.
conflict. Paul, as the bad parent, constantly undermines Laurette's attempts to instil moral values in the child. Confronted with Paul's increasingly abusive behaviour, Laurette decides to divorce him. Although she is heartbroken when her young son chooses to stay with his father, Laurette is firm in her resolve to leave the marriage. She finds a good secretarial job and becomes a career woman. In a traditional ending to this otherwise unusual film, Laurette finds happiness in a new marriage with her kindly and wealthy employer and is rewarded as well with a reunion with her long-lost son. The latter, as an adult, in a heartrending climax to the film, realises that his father has been the wrongdoer and his mother has always been the good parent.

Previous Australian films had rarely shown mothers in the workforce, even before the dire warnings of maternal deprivation in the 1940s. According to Ann Kaplan, films from the United States castigated any woman who would choose a career over motherhood. Kaplan criticised the American films of the 1980s, *Baby Boom, Raising Arizona* and *The Good Mother* for emphasising the value of domesticity and disregarding the mother's satisfaction or need to work.47 By contrast, in the 1940's Australian film, *A Son is Born*, the mother was not prepared to sacrifice her life for her child. She managed to escape from her oppressive maternal role to find autonomy and fulfilment. Although Laurette was portrayed as far from the stereotypical selfless person that had been the distinctive sign of motherhood in films, she was shown to be a devoted, good mother and in the end, she was not punished for moving away from her maternal responsibilities, and was rewarded with a better life.

Notwithstanding the strong-willed Laurette, mothers who took control of their own lives were rare in post-war films. More commonly, they were represented as sacrificing their own needs for the family. A divergence from the typical maternal behaviour, however, could be discerned in two films set in outback Australia. Although the mothers were portrayed caring for the family, each showed unusual strength in dealing with the

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exigencies of her harsh rural life. In her examination of Hollywood films of the 1940s, Andrea Walsh noted the introduction of strong mothers who displayed ‘power, courage, physical stamina and perseverance’. The mothers in these Australian films exactly fit the American model described by Walsh.

The first, Harry Watt's *The Overlanders* (1946), takes place during World War Two and tells of a family of mother, father and two grown-up daughters who travel a vast distance overland in Northern Australia to take a herd of cattle safely away from the possible invasion and possession by the Japanese army. In the prologue of the film, the mother appears as a passive figure, much like her counterpart of the 1930s. She sits patiently waiting while her husband destroys all her precious household possessions, muttering, 'The Japs will get nothing from me'. The domesticity of her life is reinforced by her role as camp cook during the ensuing droving expedition. By the end of the film, however, it is clear that she works as hard as anyone in the camp. Effectively stopping a physical argument among the men, she asserts: 'While we're in camp, I'm boss'. To the surprise of the leader of the expedition, she hits the men with a saucepan, stops the fight and orders the miscreants to leave, telling them that 'we don't want dingoes'. This scene is reminiscent of the 1923 film *When the Kellys Were Out*, when the mother uses a saucepan in the same way against the policeman sent to arrest her son, Ned.

In the second film, Ralph Smart's *Bitter Springs*, the pioneers, Wally and Ma King, with their adult daughter and son, attempt to set up a home in the outback. The family's subsequent conflict with an Aboriginal group which has been in the area for many years, is central to the narrative. Ma King, showing her strength of character like the mother in *The Overlanders*, moves away from her role of camp cook on several occasions. In one

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49 Although the film was released in 1950, it was, as Pike & Cooper concluded, 'characteristic of the Ealing Studio's liberalism of the 1940s', and so belonged in this decade. Pike & Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*, pp. 275-6.
50 Perhaps a connection could be made with the name King and the English origins of the film and the struggle to settle the outback without regard to the original inhabitants. The husband's name may only be an amusing coincidence.
memorable scene where Aborigines confront the settlers, mother and daughter stand on a riverbank with the men, rifles raised, ready to protect their new home. When her house is burned down almost as soon as it is completed, the mother resolutely insists that they remain on the property and rebuild. Ma King's stoic endurance of the hardship and desolation of outback life coincides with many stories of early pioneering experience. At the same time, her traditional maternal qualities are not overlooked. During a siege when the family's drinking water is almost finished, she selflessly gives her own ration away.\(^{51}\)

While the mothers in *The Overlanders* and *Bitter Springs* were undoubtedly strong, the selfless, devoted aspect of good mothering was always part of their image. The sacrificing-mother theme reached its pinnacle in another 1940s production, T.O. McCreadie's *Always Another Dawn* (1947). In this film, motherhood was linked to issues of citizenship and loyalty to the nation. Set during the World War Two, the film tells the story of Molly Reagan whose husband lost his life in the navy during the First World War. Molly is firmly within the paradigm of the good citizen-mother. She supports her only son's decision to enlist, and when he is killed, instead of railing against the futility of the wars which have claimed the men in her family, this noble mother is proud and resolute. Her spirit of nationalism and her attitude toward the loss of her son, however, was not acclaimed universally. Pike and Cooper have reported that the film was criticised for its banality and war-mongering platitudes.\(^{52}\) While depictions of the mother who tolerated her subordinate, unselfish lifestyle were commonly accepted, a woman who could lose both her husband and son to war without demur was not credible.

Despite the scepticism shown toward the selfless mother in *Always Another Dawn*, those few films which featured mothers during the 1950s retained the traditional expectations of the role. Devoted mothers were rewarded, while conversely, those women who were not

\(^{51}\)She gave the last drop of water to her husband, Wally. This brought up a peculiarity, — at least to audiences of the 1990's — of many films in which there was a sense that the woman must be selfless and devoted to her family, while the father took the top position in her list of people to care for. See observations about *The Sundowners* (1960), this chapter.

\(^{52}\)Pike & Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*, p. 270.
prepared to conform to guidelines were punished. Michael S. Gordon's *Wherever She Goes* (1951), based on the true story of the early life of Eileen Joyce, the brilliant concert pianist, provided an example of the first type. The family is poverty-stricken, as Eileen's father is an unsuccessful gold prospector. Living with the family in a tent on the goldfields, the mother spends her spare time making dresses for Eileen out of old clothes. One scene epitomizes her sacrifice. Resignedly, she cuts up her best dress so that Eileen might have a new outfit. The mother's load is never lightened and though she does not complain, she is rarely happy or carefree. Her life does not change until the last scene of the film. As the train which is carrying the teenager Eileen away from poverty to international fame draws out of the station, the mother's tense face lightens. The scene fitted the conclusions of cinema scholar, Linda Williams, who has argued that the mother's greatest sacrifice was to be separated from her child. Mrs Joyce was a good mother who was pleased to make such a sacrifice. The loss of her daughter could have been seen as a punishment, but the final moments of the film left the impression that she had been rewarded.

The second type of mother, who did not conform to ideals of sacrifice and devotion, could be found in Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955). Sarah McMann is a complex and not an entirely unsympathetic figure. She lives on an outback property, taking charge of the family home while her husband, Douglas, tends to their vast cattle station. At the beginning of the film, Sarah's baby son dies. Although the death of a child can sometimes be seen as the result of poor mothering, this is not the case, as Sarah is clearly distraught at the death. In any event, when Sarah is asked to care for a motherless Aboriginal baby, she refuses. This is, perhaps, an understandable reaction, although it is voiced in harsh terms which serve to emphasise her own personal, rather selfish feelings more than the tragic loss of her son. She cries: 'Take it away, I won't die twice'. After a period, she relents and agrees to take care of the orphan whom she names Jedda. The child, whom she comes to love, is now a happy toddler and is able to make Sarah laugh once again.

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The film narrative confronts the problems caused by raising an Aboriginal girl in a white environment. Sarah plays a crucial part as she educates Jedda in the same way that she would her own biological child. She denies Jedda's tribal ancestry and openly attempts to deter her from any association with other members of her aboriginal family. Douglas, perhaps ahead of his time, points out to Sarah that Jedda needs her own culture, while Sarah, somewhat selfishly, refuses to understand the point he is making. The clash of cultures and tension created from this situation is dramatically portrayed in a pivotal scene of the film. Jedda, now a young woman, is at the piano, significantly practising classical European music, when she hears the sound of traditional aboriginal music through the open window. Although she loves her white mother, the full-blood Aboriginal, Marbuk, is too much for her to resist and she goes away with him, and ultimately to her death. Sarah has lost her own baby and now, also, her adopted daughter, Jedda. While not overlooking the important ramifications and problems of assimilationist policies, the film's outcome has a direct bearing on the representation of the maternal role. It suggests that Sarah's concern with her own happiness and her failure to encompass Jedda's aboriginality was selfishly motivated and in consequence, she was harshly punished.

The only film in the next decade to feature a substantial part for a mother was American Fred Zinneman's, *The Sundowners* (1960). Although outspoken and respected, Ida Carmody cheerfully accepts her itinerant life and the deficiencies of Paddy her gambling husband. When he loses all the money she has painstakingly saved for a deposit on a house, she generously and immediately forgives him. Although her dream of a home is gone, she shows no sign of anger or disappointment. Laughingly, she remarks that she loves her husband and will never be able to change him. It is an idealistic, almost ludicrous reaction and a more appropriate one, perhaps, would be resentment and disillusionment. As Ida had been a good devoted mother, however, it was not appropriate

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54Pike & Cooper in *Australian Film 1900-1977*, used the spelling 'Marbuck' as did the video release cover of the film. The film itself, in the introductory frame spelt it Marbuk, although it should be pointed out it also used 'Aboriginee'. The film titles listed Robert Tudewalli and Narla Kunoth, when elsewhere, for instance in the film's publicity, they were known as Robert Tudawali and Ngarla Kunoth.
that she be punished. In order to conform more closely to the traditional maternal paradigm, the final scenes of the film worked to ensure that, despite her loss, she appeared to be rewarded.

Historically, *The Sundowners* was interesting as it contained a scene, which was relevant to the changing family pattern. The mid-1950s marked the beginning of the youth culture, when teenagers, in a time of full-employment, were obtaining some financial independence with the availability of part-time jobs. From the earlier position of 'being seen and not heard', they began to be allowed some voice and authority within the home. In this 1957 film, Ida Carmody is a good mother who recognises her son, Sean's emotional need for a more secure home life, although her duty to her husband overrides her maternal responsibility. When Sean complains about their itinerant life, his mother replies, 'Don't ask me to choose between you and Dad, because I'll choose him every time'. Her expression of allegiance to her husband was important in drawing attention to the end of an era. From this time on, good mothers in films were expected to put their child's interests first.

There was an immense change in the figure of the mother in films from the 1970s. Idealised depictions of the traditional mother were rare in the decade, and when the mother appeared in films, she appeared to have slipped from the pedestal which she had occupied almost since the beginning of cinema. Throughout the decade, most mothers were represented as inadequate, selfish, repressed, or even monstrous. Because she had usually been depicted as a good selfless woman, the bad mother may have come as a shock to Australian cinema goers.

The mother, Susie, in Tim Burstall's *Petersen* (1974) was cast in a mould that many of her contemporaries in the real world were trying to reform. McFarlane's insensitive and

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55Curiously, perhaps, bad mothers were often depicted ill-treating daughters but not sons. The analysis of these films can be found in chapter 5, which is devoted to the mother/daughter relationship. They included Brian Kavanagh's *A City's Child* (1972), Jim Sharman's *Patrick White's The Night the Prowler* (1979) and Simon Wincer's *Snapshot* (1979).
patronising review has summed it up when he referred to her 'a nice dim little wife'. Susie provides a quintessential representation of maternal inadequacy that was the hallmark of the decade. The seeming-normality of her domestic life, the happiness of the children, her sexual compatibility with her husband, makes this an extremely disturbing film. That she is not vilified, but presented as an inept mother and an irritation to her husband, substantiates the point. The film, perhaps, is an exploration of the sexual promiscuity of the time, although it implies an underlying hostility to motherhood and an indifference to the contemporary problems they were facing. It is worth noting as well that it was written by David Williamson, who is not usually celebrated for his sympathetic portrayal of women.

Throughout the film, although Susie is shown cleaning up and preparing meals, the deficiencies of her mothering abilities are underlined. This is achieved by frequent comparisons with Petersen's superior fathering capacity. Three episodes are central to understanding the film's representation of the mother figure. In the first, an early and important establishing scene, Petersen is fixing a faulty electrical plug, perhaps as a signal of his ability to save family from harm. He chats to his two daughters, while Susie, significantly out of sight in the kitchen, attends to her chores. Secondly, later in the film, a gang of violent youths interrupts a party that Susie and Petersen are attending. The children are asleep outside the house, in a van. Petersen, fearing their vulnerability, swiftly removes his daughters from the vehicle and brings them to safety into the house. It is easy to feel contempt for Susie, smiling inanely in the melée of the party, oblivious to the children's danger. In the third scene, Petersen, returning from an idyllic weekend with his lover, is met by his wife who is distraught and almost hysterical. One of their daughters is very ill. Calmly, Petersen takes charge of the situation, and sits with the child while the mother goes to bed. Needless to say, the child is better in the morning. For the third time in this film, the father is cast, not as sharing the parenting tasks, but as the domestic saviour. In effect he takes over the caring side of Susie's mothering role.

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The misogynist nature of this film is most obvious in the heavy-handed contrast it draws between the characters of Susie and Petersen. She is vapid, happy, incompetent, content with her life. He, on the other hand, is a capable electrician, striving for a university degree. Petersen is the acclaimed hero of the film. His many extra-marital sexual encounters are portrayed humorously or as a sign of his virility, not as a betrayal of a loyal wife. Susie, on the other hand, remains so trusting and accepting, that she appears gullible and ignorant. Even at the end of the film when Petersen fails his university course and is rejected by his lecturer-lover, whom he rapes savagely, he retains the understanding of the audience. McFarlane, for example, was sympathetic to Petersen and claiming that the rape was in response to the tutor's rejection. Even more alarming, perhaps, McFarlane confessed to sympathy 'for [Petersen's] pain and for the failure implicit in his return to mindless sexual availability'.

In Petersen, despite a superficially cordial marriage, there is an underlying malice toward the mother. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Paul Cox's film Inside Looking Out (1977), which traces a constant and unresolvable dispute between husband and wife. The mother, Elizabeth, who loves their small child but finds domesticity unsatisfying, is angry with her husband, Robert. After a row, she leaves home to seek solace with her friends. Although Elizabeth telephones later to ensure that the daughter is being cared for by the babysitter, she has committed an unpardonable sin which signals that she is a bad mother. Even though it was for only a short time, she had deserted the child. Robert, who is seen more often within the home with the child, plays the good parent who is permanently bewildered by his wife's dissatisfaction with a marriage which he clearly finds satisfactory.

57Eric Reade explained the success of Petersen at the box office: 'It didn't make you think. You knew scores of blokes just like him'. Reade, History and Heartburn, pp. 216-7.
The film forms part of the oeuvre of a somewhat eccentric director. Cox's films focus on the relationships of characters who typically do little else than discuss their emotional problems. Although *Inside Looking Out* showed the mother's desires and allowed her to articulate her problems, her dissatisfaction appeared to be without real cause. The film's mis-en-scene, a trendy middle-class suburban home with appropriate accoutrements and intelligent, articulate friends, served to invalidate her complaints. Ultimately, Cox endorsed the ideological question of the 1970s, which asked, 'what are women complaining about?' Elizabeth came across as a hard-to-please woman whose selfishness threatens a comfortable relationship, while the perplexed husband was valiantly struggling to preserve the life of the family. The mother's problems were never depicted with compassion, and were seen as selfish and the cause of the marital disharmony.

Phillip Noyce's *Newsfront* (1978) presented a similar relationship in which the mother is dissatisfied with her child rearing responsibilities. Although her problems are obvious and understandable, she too is treated harshly in the film. A devout Catholic, Fay finds it difficult to care for her young children, when Len is away for long periods, working. She complains that she is tired of coping with the children without his help and ultimately they divorce. Fay is represented as a whining, sanctimonious woman. Len, in contrast, is a likeable and competent journalist. The setting of the home adds to the implied criticism of her role. In one scene, when he returns from an 'important' political assignment, she is in the kitchen. It is messy and cluttered, the children are noisy and complaining and adding to the muddled domesticity of the scene, she is changing the baby on the kitchen table. Kindly, he moves to comfort her, and she shrieks: 'Don't touch me!' Her behaviour scotches any sympathy an audience might feel for the hardships his absences from home could bring to a mother of three small children. While the film pays lip service to the problems of rearing children without help from a partner, it offers no solution except the

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59 Cox continued this theme of the puzzled husband and unreasonable wife in his 1984 film, *My First Wife*. For a detailed analysis of this film, which made the point that the film reflected Cox's own state of mind, see chapter 6.
punishment of divorce and there is no sympathy for the frazzled mother, who is depicted as difficult, selfish and inadequate.

In these films, Susie, Elizabeth and Fay were all portrayed as inadequate mothers who were ultimately responsible for the disharmony within the family. Their maternal performance was contrasted with their husband's behaviour which was rational and competent. These images possibly can be explained when viewed in the context of the political and economic conditions taking place in Australian society in the 1970s. Many women had entered the workforce, gained some independence and buoyed by the growth of the women's movement, had begun to question ideas of traditional motherhood and demand equality and recognition within the home. Many of the film narratives of the decade were presented from the male point-of-view which however unconsciously, selfishly and deliberately undermined the woman's changing position.

An additional conspicuous characteristic during the 1970s, which weakened the mother's importance and made the good mother in films even more rare, came from images of her alienation from her teenaged children. The teenager, whose point-of-view the narrative most commonly presented, was often depicted sympathetically. In contrast, the mother was represented as provocative, old-fashioned or carping. The father in these narratives was usually good-natured and easy-going and remained outside the conflict. This cinematic representation of the relationship between family members was marked in 1970 by the appearance of filmmakers Phillip Adams and Brian Robinson's *Jack and Jill: a postscript*. Their treatment of the mother and the teenaged girl provided a model for other similar representations in the decade.

Concerned with contemporary families in suburban Australia, the film focuses on the problems of two teenagers from different classes. Gillian O'Keefe is a young woman from

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a comfortable, middle-class home who is attracted to Jack Anderson, a motorcyclist and panel beater from a poor working-class family. Almost a caricature, Mrs O'Keefe is overweight and badly dressed. A headscarf completes her image of middle-class mediocrity. Her husband, in contrast, is a barrister and Gill, an intelligent and responsible pre-school teacher whose interests include the cinema and art galleries. Gill has no respect for her mother, whom she describes to Jack as 'someone who does nothing but knit and make preserves'. In every scene they share, mother and daughter are at loggerheads. Mrs O'Keefe is appalled when she learns of Gill's relationship with Jack and orders her daughter to stop seeing him, describing him as 'a hoodlum — or even worse, lower class'. Eventually, Mrs O'Keefe's constant nagging pushes the ill-matched pair closer together. In a dramatic and tragic end to the film, Jack is killed in a motor cycle accident and Gill 'comes tumbling after', desolate and heartbroken.61

While the bad mother was a hallmark of films of the 1970s, in the next decade mothers were shown with more compassion. Part of the transformation can be explained by the entry of female filmmakers into the industry. Gillian Armstrong, one of the first and, perhaps, most well-known of the new directors, explored the subject of family relationships with great sensitivity and complexity in many of her films.62 Armstrong and other female directors such as Barbara Boyd-Anderson, (The Still Point, 1985), Robyn Nevin (The More Things Change..., 1986), Jacki McKimmie,63 (Australian Dream, 1987) and Martha Ansara (The Pursuit of Happiness, 1988) made films that were from the woman's point-of-view. As a consequence, films were more sympathetic to the difficulties that mothers experience.64 As well as showing love to their children, mothers were frequently depicted as highly skilled, intelligent and self-motivated. Those women who

61 The film used the idea of popular nursery rhymes to make the point. See Pike & Cooper, Australian Film 1900-1977, p. 320.
62 An early Armstrong film was The Singer and the Dancer (1976), which questioned women's relationships with their husbands. Her interest in family dynamics continued with the documentary style films of young women growing up: Smokes and Lollies, 1976, 14's Good, 18's Better, (1981), Bingo, Bridesmaids and Braces, (1988) and, perhaps, reached a peak with Hightide in 1987.
63 Later known as Jackie McKimmie.
64 Women other than directors contributed. For example, Ann Brooksbank scripted ...Maybe This Time in 1980 and Helen Garner wrote the screenplay and collaborated with Ken Cameron on Monkey Grip in 1982.
had interests outside domesticity, were not classed as bad mothers for attempting to realise their own vocation. After sympathetic portrayals of women's needs and desires, however, the resolution of the films was often conventionally and disappointingly traditionalist. While the women were not punished like the bad mothers of earlier films, their fantasies and dreams were found to be unrewarding and their only option was the limiting one of returning to the status quo of their family life.

The difference between maternal representations in the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps, can be demonstrated most clearly by considering the mother's relationship with her teenaged children. While conflicts persisted in the 1980s, disagreements with children were not the one-sided affairs typical of the 1970s. The attitude of the mother was shown as well as that of the child, and both were explained in more depth. This produced the kind of ambivalence which was closer, perhaps, to actual experience.

Barbara Boyd-Anderson's *The Still Point* was a case in point, as it concerned the break-up of a marriage and the very special problems of parenting a deaf child in her teenage years. The film depicted a critical point in the relationship of the daughter, Sarah, to her mother, Barbara. Sarah's character on screen was as contradictory and unsettled as are most real-life adolescents. She was moody and unreasonably resentful of Barbara's new boyfriend. Barbara was a good mother who loved Sarah, although she wanted to continue her very successful career and her association with her male companion. Film reviewer Adrian Martin based his criticism of *The Still Point* on its deficiencies as a 'teen movie', although the film was more properly seen as an investigation of the conflict between a newly-divorced mother and her teenaged daughter.

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66. While the representation of the mothers in Michael Caulfield's *Fighting Back* (1983) and Ken Cameron's *Fast Talking* (1984), appeared to revert to the mother-blaming which was common in the previous decade, a closer examination found that their behaviour was explained by the difficulty of mothering with a violent alcoholic partner. Although they could not be thought of as good mothers, the women were not made scapegoats for the problems of the children.
Barbara's involvement in her career is established from the start of the film, when she becomes angry at Sarah for interrupting her work. She does not take on the customary mother role of preparing meals, hanging out clothes, ironing or sewing, and she is never in the kitchen. In most scenes she is reading or busy writing at the computer. She is a university graduate, dresses as a career woman and probably does not even own an apron. Despite this, she is a good mother whose concern for her daughter is apparent. Her parenting difficulties are expressed and treated sympathetically. When an impasse between the two women is reached, however, and there seems to be no way to settle their differences, the film reverts to traditional ways of solving problems. Sarah is sent to the country to stay with her wise and understanding grandfather, who is able to negotiate a peaceful solution. Although Barbara retains her daughter's love as well as her job and her male friend, the film disappointingly undercuts her ability to manage without male intervention.

While *The Still Point* showed special problems associated with the mothering experience, other films used the mother's behaviour to subvert a central element of the Australian identity. Depicting women in ordinary suburban situations, two films used a satirical approach to question the idea of home ownership. The women in each were not fulfilled by motherhood and were intent on improving their lifestyle. In previous years, they would have been construed as bad mothers, although in the eighties, they were likeable protagonists and loving mothers whose actions did not appear to harm either children or their partners. In Denny Lawrence's *Emoh Ruo* (1985) and Jacki McKimmie's *Australian Dream* (1987), both mothers wanted more out of life than the domestic experience.

The mother in *Emoh Ruo*, Terri, lives with her husband, Des, and young son, Jack, in a caravan in a beachside camping area. Although they seem to have a happy, almost enchanted life, Terri lacks what she perceives to be the security of a house in the suburbs. The film becomes a comedic portrayal of everything that can go wrong in the purchase of a home. By the end, the dream house has fallen down, both parents have lost their jobs
and Jack longs for life at the beach. The last scene shows the family with the caravan in tow, on their way back to their former beach existence. Sadly, *Emoh Ruo* undermines its own challenge to traditional notions of mothering. While it is sympathetic to Terri and blames bad luck for her misfortune, rather than bad management or naivety, at the end, Terri and her family return to a situation she was desperate to leave. The film suggests that rather than aspiring to a house in the suburbs, she should have been thankful for her mortgage-free life at the beach.

In some ways *Australian Dream* is similar to *Emoh Ruo* as it satirises the banality of Australian suburban life. Dorothy lives with her butcher-husband Geoffrey and their two children in a middle-class home in Brisbane. Geoffrey's comical, frequently absurd political aspirations provide the main source of humour. At first glance, it appears that Dorothy has made a stimulating life for herself. She is an attractive thirty-five-year-old who is studying creative writing at university. Her family does not intrude on her writing, her sexual fantasies or her party-going. She is not in the traditional good-mother mould, as in an early scene, she is shown flirting with a stripper at an all-women's party. When she finally returns home, she expects that her husband will have arranged dinner for the children. Despite her apparent freedom, Dorothy is discontented and spends her day indulging in sexual fantasies. Her lifestyle might have indicated that she was selfish and a bad mother, however, the film represents her as amusing and likeable and the audience can sympathise with her irritation at Geoffrey's pretensions. Finally, though, the narrative highlights the limitations of her attempt to make radical changes in her life. Her fantasy-man turns out to be no more exciting than her husband.

A single film stood out in the decade in attempting to come to terms with a woman's changing role in society by allowing her the choice of moving into a new and productive lifestyle within an ecologically justifiable framework. This was Martha Ansara's *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1988). The mother, Anna, decides that she is at a turning point in her life now that her teenaged daughter, Mandy, is no longer dependent on her. She takes
a job in journalism and gathers information which she uses to educate herself about issues of peace. Preservation of the planet becomes her uppermost preoccupation. Her conservative husband, reflecting the desires of many men at the time, is anxious that she continues in her traditional home-maker role. Other disagreements develop about his dubious business ethics and his desire for financial gain, which conflict with Anna's new and highly moral views. While her objections begin tentatively, Anna gains strength of purpose, eventually deciding to stop playing the part of the good, docile wife. In a pivotal scene, she refuses to accompany her husband to a business function. It is inevitable, perhaps, that she eventually leaves him, although she does so of her own choice and in the hope of a more autonomous life.

_The Pursuit of Happiness_ was a rare film in that the mother stepped out of her traditional role, yet retained a good relationship with her child. As well she changed her lifestyle when it had become unacceptable according to her principles. The strength of its position as a feminist film was undermined slightly, perhaps, as the point of assessing her domestic life was only reached when her daughter had left home and the requirement for constant mothering had ceased.

**Conclusion.**

Representations of the good mother altered considerably in Australian feature films during the period from the beginning of the century to the late 1980s. Although there were exceptions, changes in depictions of the mothering role could be delineated broadly by decade and were determined by shifts in the way mothering was viewed in society at large. For instance, in line with the official concerns about infant mortality in the first decades of the century, the duties of the early cinema mother centred on physical care and cleanliness. She was most often shown in the kitchen, preparing meals or washing and hanging out clothes. At the time, Christian principles were also a crucial part of the maternal role. The mother carried the primary responsibility for regular church attendance although she was not held to blame when in early outdoor adventures, her sons became
bushrangers. Moreover, despite her saintly personality, she defended her progeny against the law, even occasionally using physical force. While the state demanded that citizen-mothers sacrifice their sons for the benefit of the nation, the good mother in early cinema put the well-being of her offspring before considerations of loyalty to the nation.

The good mother of the films of the 1920s worked beside her husband and was a 'helpmate' rather than a subservient partner. Perhaps reflecting the notions of affluence and freedom for women at the time, she had her own opinions on family matters and was unafraid to express them. The representation changed in the 1930s, especially during the Great Depression, when mothers were depicted as agreeing with their husbands in all matters. Good mothering in films at this time reflected the official line and public opinion which held that women should not compete with men for the few jobs available, and rather, should concentrate on taking care of the family. Filmmakers could have shown the hardships of the women in the 1930s and their resourcefulness and creativity in coping with insufficient money to provide nourishment for the family. Instead, they chose to portray mothers who were tired, worried and ill and unable to make any worthwhile contribution to the household. Women on screen were financially, emotionally and physically dependent on husbands who were portrayed as undisputed heads of the households.  

Mothers in films during the 1940s, although revealing their physical strength and stoicism, were characterised by typical maternal love and devotion to the family. A

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68 This deferential mother can be found in many films of the thirties. For example, Beaumont Smith's *The Hayseeds* (1933), Raymond Longford's *The Man They Could Not Hang* (1934), Beaumont Smith's *Splendid Fellows* (1934), K.G. Hall's *Grandad Rudd* (1935), Charles Chauvel's *Heritage* (1935) and K.G. Hall's *It Isn't Done* (1937) and *Dad and Dave Come to Town* (1938).

69 Australian films of the decade did not mirror overseas imports, which in the 1940s, began to portray mothers as damaging their children. This trend could be discerned in American films like *Now Voyager* (1942) and *Mildred Pierce* (1947). In America, though not in Australia, the concern in society that mothers who had entered the workforce during the war were spending insufficient time with their families was translated to the screen. Their damaged children were meant to serve as a warning to women who might insist on staying in the workforce after the war, rather than leaving the jobs to the men and taking care of their children in the home. Film scholar Ann Kaplan noted that many of the Hollywood mothers were 'blatantly monstrous, deliberately victimising their children for sadistic and narcissistic ends, and thereby producing criminals'. Kaplan cites *Secret beyond the Door* (1948), *Marnie* (1964), *Mommie Dearest* (1981) and *Frances* (1982). E. Ann Kaplan 'Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The maternal in melodrama and the woman's film 1910-40' in C. Gledhill, (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and*
single film, Eric Porter's *A Son is Born*, broke away from this pattern and allowed the mother to exhibit independence, while still managing to retain her good mother image. She was, perhaps, a reflection of those mothers who had moved into the workforce during the war, earning respect because they demonstrated that they could maintain the family without the constant presence of their husbands. Rather than the domesticated good mother, she represented the historical experience of the mother in the public sphere.

The migration to domesticity in the suburbs during the 1950s and 1960s, was not taken up by the few Australian films made during that period. Mothers in films who approached contemporary reality were rare, and despite the prevalence of real-life middle-class affluence in the suburbs, most maternal images recalled the poverty-stricken rural families of earlier decades. While the usual constraints on depictions of mothering behaviour prevailed, however, the mother was able to show more strength of character than the passive 1930s mother. All the same, mothers who pursued their own desires and needs before those of the family were punished. Those who conformed to the practice of traditional selfless mothering were rewarded in some way.

By the time the filmmaking industry began again in the 1970s, the family structure had changed dramatically. A movement into paid work and higher education had paved the way for women to fight for equality as well as a life outside the family. In films of the decade, the idealised maternal role was replaced by the figure of the inadequate or selfish mother. This surprising transformation can be explained best, perhaps, by anxiety at the changes to the family and the fear of the power women had accrued with the women's movement. The happy family rarely appeared on screen and dissension between husband and wife was a mark of the decade. The rise of the society's interest in adolescence resulted in the sympathetic focus on teenaged children and films most often represented mothers as out of touch and insensitive to contemporary problems. There had been very few allusions to the bad mother over the years, but in the 1970s the confusion about the

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I can find only three. In *Just Peggy* (1918), the mother rejected her daughter because she feared she would
mother's role led to frequent depictions of her as contemptible, incompetent or downright monstrous.\textsuperscript{71}

Albeit tentatively, films in the 1980s began to reflect the growing acceptance in the community of changes in the family unit and the validity of women's claims for equality. Mothers were portrayed as intelligent and successful in the public arena, in addition to coping with the relationships in the family. The contribution of female filmmakers should not be underestimated in this transition to representations of a variety of ways of mothering. New Australian female filmmakers began to introduce narratives which focused on mothers and most critically, were from her point of view. Teen conflict continued, although with a heightened sympathy for the difficulties that mothers confronted. Although mothers were usually represented as dissatisfied with domesticity, those who desired self-fulfilment outside the home were acknowledged, and what is more important, perhaps, were not shown to be neglectful or harmful to their children. Vivien Nice maintained that the patriarchal affinity with binary distinctions had, since the beginning of cinema, made it convenient for male filmmakers to split mothering into 'good' and 'bad'.\textsuperscript{72} By the 1980s, the polarised mothering experience appeared to be replaced with diversity in the maternal role. The freedom to choose, however, was not absolute, and frequently, after a dramatic flutter of their wings in public, women in films most often returned to take up their responsibility of nurturing and caring for their families.

\textsuperscript{71}The few good mothers of the decade could be found in: Bruce Beresford's \textit{The Getting of Wisdom} (1977), Carl Schultz's \textit{The Blue Fin} (1978), Donald Crombie's \textit{The Irishman} (1978) and Cathy's Child (1979), Ken Hannam's \textit{Dawn!} (1979), George Miller's \textit{Mad Max} (1979) and Michael Pate's \textit{Tim} (1979). In each however, any power the mother may have accrued by her virtue was subverted in some way.