

The King's (lack of) Speech

28 February 2011 in Trends and challenges by Sally Jackson

It's one of those serendipitous things that Australia's earliest surviving sound-on-film films should be of the Duke of York, soon to be King George VI, not speaking and that one of the films up for an Oscar this year is The King's Speech in which his speech is the subject.

The Duke and Duchess of York arrived in Australia in March 1927 for the opening of Parliament House in Canberra. Upon their arrival in Sydney the young Duke steps forward to the microphone to deliver his first speech to the Australian people. The event is recorded by many British and Australian silent newsreels, but amongst them are the men from the fledgling Australian arm of DeForest Phonofilms in their first attempt at capturing the human voice on film in the open air. That they were attempting to catch the voice of a royal figure with a speech impediment was irrelevant — they were much more concerned with ensuring their newly-arrived recording system was working and that people did not obstruct the view or the audio reaching their camera and microphone. Unfortunately, they were not entirely successful, but captured enough to release the film. However, it becomes very obvious when you view the film that the Duke has a very strong Australian accent, and that indeed, it is not his voice at all.

So distant from the event and without the benefit of much documentation to explain how or why this came about, we are forced to conjecture: was it a technical mishap or were Phonofilms (Australia) directors instructed to not reproduce the Duke's voice due to his speech impediment?

Comment [A1]: Consultation of a dictionary will inform that what is described in this paragraph has nothing to do with serendipity.

Comment [A2]: There is only one.

Comment [A3]: He became king 9 years after the 1927 Australian visit.

Comment [A4]: This paragraph is so badly written that only the worst of its errors are pointed out.

Comment [A5]: This statement is ridiculous. No one stepped forward to a microphone: the De Forest Phonofilms microphone was too far away from where the Duke and Duchess were welcomed by the Lord Mayor of Sydney.

Comment [A6]: This is semantic nonsense: "them" refers to "newsreels", so the men are amongst the newsreels?

Comment [A7]: "De Forest": the name was always two words.

Comment [A8]: There is a substantial amount of material available for anyone who will make the effort to look for it.

Comment [A9]: The company's registered name was "De Forest Phonofilms (Australia) Limited".

The official story told by Phonofilms (Australia) directors was that they had arranged with the NSW government to be allowed to record the speeches of the Mayor and of the Duke of York. On the day, the microphone was placed on the dais as the Mayor and the Duke were to speak into them and the camera was aligned to have full view of both speakers. In the excitement however, the Mayor moved away from the microphone and the dais which caused the Alderman to step in between the microphone and the camera. This prevented the Mayor from being filmed and it also meant that the Duke was obscured for most of the time and was not speaking into the microphone. The camera only captured a short scene of the Duke and without sound.

Disappointed at their luck, Phonofilms (Australia) were not beaten. They salvaged the situation by acquiring a copy of the speech which was recorded using a company director's voice in their Rushcutter Bay Studio. They then looped the footage of the Duke for the required length syncing sound and vision as well as possible. As the events described are borne out by the film we can have little doubt this was the reason the Duke's voice was not recorded.

Phonofilms (Australia) first screened the film at the official opening of its Rushcutter Bay Studio in early April and it was then released to the public at Sydney's Lyceum Theatre later in the month. The film was lost to Australia until located in the United Kingdom as a copy of the film had been sent to King Edward VII by Phonofilms (Australia). [The Duke and Duchess of York arrive at Farm Cove](#) was restored to Australia in 2005 and can be found in the National Film and Sound Archive's Collection.

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Comment [A10]: The sole general manager, Stanley William Hawkins, gave a version of events at the Royal Commission on the Moving Picture Industry in Australia.

Comment [A11]: "arranged ... to be allowed"?

Comment [A12]: Lord Mayor of Sydney.

Comment [A13]: There was no dais at the reception area.

Comment [A14]: What does this refer to? Should it be "it"?

Comment [A15]: The Lord Mayor was not near the microphone when the Duke and Duchess arrived, so did not move away from it.

Comment [A16]: There were quite a few aldermen.

Comment [A17]: The microphone was between the camera and the aldermen, and it is the aldermen who created the distance between the microphone and the Lord Mayor and Duke.

Comment [A18]: This is not true. The Duke is visible while reading all of his reply.

Comment [A19]: The sound was almost certainly "captured" but the Duke's speech was inaudible because of his distance from the microphone.

Comment [A20]: What is the evidence that it was a company director who did the voice-over?

Comment [A21]: Rushcutters Bay

Comment [A22]: The Rushcutters Bay studio was not complete at the time: the speech was almost certainly recorded at the company's studios in Bathurst St, Sydney.

Comment [A23]: As the details of the "events described" are so much at odds with what is seen on the film nothing reasonable can be deduced from the above description.

Comment [A24]: Rushcutters

Comment [A25]: There is no evidence that this film was ever exhibited to the general public, at least in Australia.

Comment [A26]: The full history of this copy of the film is not known. The Royal Archives in Britain have no record that the King ever received a copy.

Comment [A27]: The English monarch in 1927 was King George V. This error has since been corrected.