

# Dunbar

ROBERT DUNBAR was a pioneer in a field which is now taken for granted, film studies, and from 1957 ran Britain's first film school, the London School of Film Technique.

His family came from Berwickshire and he was baptised at the fishing town of Eyemouth. But he had been born in London, because his father, John Dunbar, founder of the Odham's publishing group, was working at *The Encore*, a music-hall trade paper, at the time of his son's birth. The family maid would take young Bob to "silents" at the Ionic Cinema, under the bridge at Golders Green Station. At 14 he edited the *Bryanston Saga* at Bryanston School, Dorset. He lasted a day at Christ Church, Oxford, then left to work for the German film company Ufa in Berlin.

He was apprenticed to the producer Erich Pommer, on films starring Friedrich Hollaender, Maurice Evans, Charles Boyer and Conrad Veidt. When Hitler came to power in 1933, Dunbar returned to England and worked at Gainsborough Studios, in London (later Shepperton and Elstree). He became assistant director, scriptwriter and production manager at Denham Studios in north-west London, under Alexander Korda. He assisted René Clair, Bertold Viertel and Alfred Hitchcock.

In 1936 he worked on W.C. Menzies's *Things to Come*. H.G. Wells, its scriptwriter, frequently visited the studio. Korda didn't want his interpretation challenged and made Dunbar take Wells for long walks to divert his attention. Dunbar wrote:

Instead of running up and down in that endless concrete corridor, past the Seven Stages of Korda, the workshops, the scene-docks and the "restaurant with seating for 1,000 persons" or broiling under the arcs on the set, I could roam the delightful grounds - 165 acres, with spacious gardens, lawns, woods, meadows, river and trout stream.

In 1939 Dunbar set out for Hollywood in a Studebaker with a wind-up gramophone. He got as far as Mexico City. He had met Tatiana Blagoveshenskaya, a White Russian, and, when war broke out, they married. Dunbar was seconded to the British Ministry of Information and later the Foreign Office as Deputy Head of Inter-Allied Information in Mexico.

In 1944 the Dunbars transferred to Moscow, where, until 1948, Bob worked as First Secretary and Press Attaché for the British Embassy. He was editor-in-chief of the weekly *Britanski Soyuznik (British Ally)*, the first British newspaper to be published in Russian in the Soviet Union. He learnt Russian as well as he had learnt Spanish and German. At diplomatic receptions he met Boris Pasternak and Sergei Prokofiev. Sergei Eisenstein became a close friend.

As production assistant on Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), Dunbar travelled from Vienna to Rome to collect Orson Welles to play Harry Lime. Welles was trying to finish his

own film of *Othello*. Dunbar convinced Welles that the minuscule part of Lime was worth accepting:

Joseph Cotten had worked with Orson in his Mercury Theatre (and, of course, *Citizen Kane*). Therefore, because of the almost sibling rivalry rife among companies of actors Orson would be unable to resist the proposition that - having let Joe bore the pants off the audience for 11 reels - Orson would suddenly materialise in the 12th and steal the picture.

In 1950 Dunbar became manager of Imperadio Pictures and resumed work as a scriptwriter. He worked with John Grierson, director of the documentary *The Night Mail*, and wrote and produced the Prestige series of documentaries for Associated Rediffusion. In 1959, he produced the acclaimed *The Man Upstairs*, a psychological drama starring Richard Attenborough.

In 1957 Dunbar had set up the London School of Film Technique. Arnold Wesker, Mike Leigh, Bill Douglas and Iain Sinclair, who remembered the school in his novel *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), were early students. The film producer Charles Fraser has recalled how "the school was trundled across the river from its founding base in an art school in Victoria on the wagons from the Brixton market to its home... above Greig's butcher's shop in Electric Avenue, Brixton". Although many European countries possessed national film schools, at the time Britain only had two film departments, in the Royal College of Art and Regent Street Polytechnic. The school moved from Brixton to Charlotte Street in 1964, then to Covent Garden, sharing a store loft with the Opera House.

The intake rose to 240 students on intensive two-year 52-week programmes. Classes were multi-disciplinary. Technicians and directors worked on projects with the students; Charles Crichton, Sydney Cole and Roger Manvell taught and Jean Renoir and François Truffaut, among others, gave talks.

Truffaut wanted to cast Dunbar's twin daughters Jennifer and Margaret in his film *Two English Girls* (1971) but they declined to take part. During the 1960s Dunbar's son John ran the Indica art gallery in London and was married to the singer Marianne Faithfull. Jennifer married the poet Ed Dorn in 1968.

In 1970 the school lost its bid to become a government-funded National Film School. This was a disappointment to Dunbar. In 1974, following economic unrest and the three-day week, the overseas student intake slumped. Liquidators were called in, as classes proceeded by candlelight. The Dunbars mortgaged and lost both homes in attempts to bail the school out. Although the debts were small, the school possessed no assets and was forced to close.

Dunbar bore no grudges. He worked freelance for the British Film Institute, wrote film articles and sat on film panels. He worked as a landscape gardener, always in his black, film-maker's peaked cap. He co-founded with Roy Fowler the Bectu Film History Project, an oral history archive. For many years he chaired the Journal Committee of the film technicians' union the ACTT, of which he was an honorary member - in recognition of his service to the British film industry both as a producer and as an active member of the union for almost 40 years.

NICHOLAS JOHNSON

Robert Dunbar, film-maker and teacher: born London 6 June 1914; married 1940 Tatiana Blagoveshenskaya (one son, three daughters); died London 29 April 2000.



Durack in her studio: her unmasking as the Aboriginal 'Eddie Burrup' caused consternation

# Elizabeth Durack

ELIZABETH DURACK was a powerful and idiosyncratic voice in Australian art and, in her old age, under the alter ego "Eddie Burrup", a subject of particular controversy.

Born in Perth in 1915, she was a scion of one of the great pioneering families of Western Australia. The story of how her grandfather, Patrick Durack, had opened up the Kimberley region of north-west Australia to white cattle-farmers, was told by Elizabeth's sister, the late Dame Mary Durack, in her classic book *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959).

Elizabeth's childhood was divided between Perth and the family cattle stations in the remote outback. She was schooled at the Loreto Convent in Perth and early on showed an enthusiasm for drawing. She used to collaborate with her sister in producing an illustrated newsletter, "Kookaburra and Kangaroo", which they sent to their father in the Kimberley. The sisters continued to collaborate in later life producing an acclaimed series of illustrated children's books, which did much to introduce Australian readers to the richness of Aboriginal life.

Elizabeth Durack first came into contact with Aboriginal people on her visits to the family cattle-station, where many worked and lived. Over the years she gained their trust, learning much of their way of life, and being embraced within their social networks. It was a profound knowledge that decisively affected the course of her art.

She considered her introduction to the great overhanging gallery of Aboriginal rock paintings on the Keep River as one of the key artis-

tic experiences of her life. It was certainly more formative than the brief year she spent enrolled at the Chelsea Polytechnic in London. Her abiding memories of that time were the cold of the English winter (if not summer) and the dreariness of the art classes. She returned to Australia in 1937, moved to Sydney, and married the journalist Frank Clancy. They had two children, and, although she subsequently left Clancy, they never divorced.

In 1946 she moved back to the Kimberley region, settling first in the little pearl-fishing town of Broome, and then further inland, on the Durack cattle-station at Ivanhoe, on the Ord River. The following decade was productive. Durack had a series of well-received solo exhibitions not only in Perth but also in Melbourne and Sydney. Her recurrent themes were the majestic landscape of the Kimberley and the life of the Aboriginal people within it. Her style, fluid and colourful, had an intensity which, if sometimes dreamlike, was never whimsical.

She began to receive mural commissions from leading Australian companies and institutions. In 1961 she was one of only three female artists to be selected for the important show of "Recent Australian Painting" at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, an exhibition that also included Sidney Nolan, Fred Williams, Brett Whiteley and Arthur Boyd.

She continued to develop and experiment as an artist, in one series, *Discoverers and Explorers*, pushing towards abstraction, before returning to more conventional style of representation. Honours

followed. In 1966 she was appointed OBE for services to art and literature, and, in 1982, she was appointed CMG. Her work was acquired by the major state and private collections in Australia.

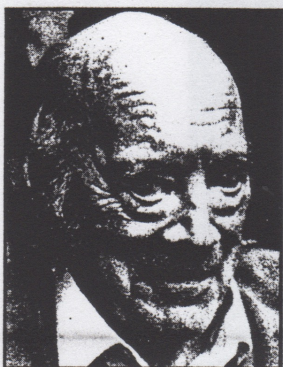
It was, however, her last phase of creativity that caused most consternation and debate. In the mid-1990s, seeking a new voice and direction, she assumed the artist persona of "Eddie Burrup", an Aboriginal man of her own invention. The work that she produced under his name, though it drew on the great well of Aboriginal spirituality, owed little or nothing to established Aboriginal iconography. "Burrup's" style was unique. It was also much admired.

That is until Durack "outed" herself in 1997. The revelation was a bombshell. In the highly charged politico-racial climate of modern Australia, it seemed to some that she was guilty of an act of post-colonial appropriation and even betrayal. There was a general outcry which surprised and distressed Durack who eloquently defended the artist's right to assume new voices in quest to open up new areas of creativity.

A British audience will have the chance to judge the achievement of Elizabeth Durack and "Eddie Burrup" later this year, at an exhibition of her work at the Cork Street Gallery from 24 July to 5 August.

REBECCA HOSSAC

Elizabeth Durack, artist: born Perth, Western Australia 6 June 1915; OBE 1966; CMG 1982; married 1939 Frank Clancy (one son, one daughter); died Perth 25 May 2000.



Dunbar: film school