



PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK is a slightly belated February, 2015 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film.

Australia 1975 color 107 minutes (Director's Cut) live action feature suspense drama The Australian Film Commission / McElroy & McElroy / Picnic Productions Pty. Ltd. / Z Producers: Hal McElroy and Jim McElroy

14 of a possible 20 points

*****1/2 of a possible *******

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

2 Direction: Peter Weir

1 Editing: Max Lemon

2 Cinematography: Russell Boyd*

Nature Photography: David Sanderson*

Still Photography: David Kynoch*

1 Lighting: Tony Tegg

1 Screenplay: Cliff Green, based on the novel by Joan Lindsay

Continuity: Gilda Baracchi

2 Music: Gheorghe Zamfir*

(Doina: Sus Pe Culmea Dealului and Doina: Lui Petru Unc),

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: 2nd Movement of EINE KLEINE NACHTMUSIK,

Ludwig van Beethoven: 2nd Movement of Piano Concerto No. 5

**Johann Sebastian Bach: Prelude No. 1 from The Well-Tempered Clavier,
Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: 2nd Movement from String Quartet No. 1,
Bruce Smeaton**

2 Art Direction: David Copping*

Props: Mont Fieguth (Master), Graham Walker

Costume Designer: Judith Dorsman*

Makeup: José Luis Perez (Supervisor),

0 Sound: Don Connolly (Sound Recordist), Greg Bell (Dubbing Editor)

1 Acting

2 Creativity

14 total points

Cast: Rachel Roberts (Mrs. Appleyard, headmistress of College), Vivean Gray (Miss Greta McCraw, maths and science instructress), Helen Morse (Mademoiselle de Poitiers, French and dancing instructress), Kirsty Child (Miss Dora Lumley, music teacher), Tony Llewellyn-Jones (Irish Tom, handyman at College), Jacki Weaver (Minnie, maid at College), Frank Gunnell (Mr. Whitehead, gardener at College), Anne-Louise Lambert* (Miranda St. Clair), Karen Robson (Irma Leopold), Jane Vallis (Marion Quade), Christine Schuler (Edith), Margaret Nelson (Sara Waybourne), Ingrid Mason (Rosamund), Jenny Lovell (Blanche), Janet Murray (Juliana), Wyn Roberts (Sergeant Bumpher, constable), Kay Taylor (Mrs. Bumpher), Garry McDonald (Constable Jones), Martin Vaughan (Ben Hussey, coachman), John Fegan (Doctor McKenzie), Peter Collingwood (Colonel Fitzhubert), Olga Dickie (Mrs. Fitzhubert), Dominic Guard (Michael Fitzhubert, nephew of the Colonel and his wife), John Jarratt (Albert Crandall, valet to the Fitzhuberts), Kevin Gebert (Bus Driver), Faith Kleinig (Cook), others

February 14, 1900. A hot summer day in South Australia. Perhaps too sultry for indoor classes. It's Valentine's Day. Pupils in a College for Young Women are more interested in exchanging cards and tokens than studying. So Headmistress Appleyard gifts them with an outing to Hanging Rock, ostensibly for the purpose

of studying rock formations. She administers a warning not to ascend above lower slopes due to “venomous snakes and poisonous ants.” In other words, death awaits the venturesome.

Dressed in finest formal wear, including corsets and dress shoes, favored adolescents depart in a wagon for their dangerous destination. Accompanying them are three adults: the cart driver, Miss Greta McCraw and Mademoiselle Dianne de Poitiers. Ben Hussey has little responsibility beyond transporting the students. Miss McCraw, who appears to be immersed in theorems of a geometry text, would normally be teaching maths and sciences. She draws the current assignment possibly due to considerable knowledge of local geology. Mademoiselle de Poitiers, the school’s instructress in French and dancing, accompanies as a chaperone.

Not every child or teacher is permitted to depart for the bush. Music instructress Dora Lumley and orphan Sara Waybourne are left behind, the former for an unspecified reason, the latter due to ongoing rebellion against Mrs. Appleyard.

Sara has a crush on schoolmate Miranda. So their enforced severance is especially galling. The orphan is struggling to understand what Miranda means by a cryptic comment she will be going away and not returning. Now? Soon? After graduation?

Though not specified in source novel or film, it seems likely Hanging Rock is an Aboriginal sacred site due to its age and unique contours. If so, presence of teenage females there would amount to sacrilege. Unless they had ritually cleansed themselves beforehand.

Is Mrs. Appleyard aware of the potential trespass?

If so, she deliberately places her charges at risk. If not, the woman displays stereotypical white ignorance of local customs. She’s treading in a mine field, with dire consequences foreseeable to anyone acquainted with Dreamtime lore. Perhaps this arrogant educator regards Aboriginal legends and beliefs as dismissible pagan superstitions. Enlightened people should not fear taboos of untutored savages. Still, Mrs. Appleyard doesn’t visit the rock herself until after a series of disheartening events. Civilization is so much safer.

Safer, yes. More satisfying? Not for three young members of the picnic party. Not content with merely reading poems and reproducing in sketch books the rugged landform looming over them, Miranda St. Clair, Marion Quade, and Irma Leopold request permission to hike into the bush to take measurements of rocks. Miranda has a definite ulterior goal, repeatedly rejecting attractive side trips. She wants to reach pinnacles at the Rock's crest. Only upward travel meets with approval. Does she covet a probable sweeping view from topmost crag? Hope to maximize tanning opportunities? Feel a mountain climber's obsession to mount the highest peak? When she steps across the creek on her way to the heights, there's a moment of suspension, reflecting shift from measured time to eternal present. Entering a world of Dreamtime, the girl may hope to achieve permanent Valentine's Day, a kind of endless romance.

Watches stop at high noon. Afternoon is forever.

If Marion's comment asserting popular ignorance about life's purpose is a reliable indicator, she's in search of a personal reason for living. Science, religion, poetry, and mathematics have failed to provide her with one. Can the Rock? For Marion, Hanging Rock, where nature rules, is an alternative worth investigating.

Irma's a follower, unsure of herself. She's accustomed to accepting leadership from others, the Mirandas and Marions not content to let themselves be directed externally. If they want to climb Hanging Rock, she will accompany them. Partly out of curiosity. Mostly from habit. Isn't education a trip into the unknown?

So the trio sets off for adventure, with whiny Edith trailing behind. Edith wants to be part of the lively, popular set. One Miranda normally dominates. In fact, Edith admires the blonde girl not solely due to her more elegant wardrobe. Miranda blithely dispenses material riches Edith covets. If she just keeps hanging about her, someday one or another prize will get distributed to her, perhaps a bracelet, hair ribbon, or sash. Wouldn't that make snobs who routinely avoid her seethe?

Miranda looks like an angel, too, one with the kind of face and limbs Edith would love to possess. If she can't actually be Miss St. Clair, at least she can claim the reflected glory of being her close friend.

As the quartet mounts higher, they come to resting spots. Shoes and stockings are shed. For greater comfort? Certainly not to improve traction.

There's a growing gap between Edith and the rest. It's not simply physical. The freedom they seek is not what pudgy tagalong wants. She prefers security, ease, routine. Everything the vanguard freely relinquishes.

Below, the girls' trek is being observed by numerous pairs of eyes. Two young males are also obligated to picnic that fateful day in the vicinity of Hanging Rock.

Scrambling schoolgirls on rocky slopes above eventually draw the attention of Michael Fitzhubert and Albert Crandall.

Albert finds three of them alluring to watch. That's the limit of his interest, however. For they belong to a higher social class. Courting them would only create trouble for him.

Michael is mesmerized by Miranda's swanlike grace. He sets off to track her down.

Finding a fairly level resting-place, the quartet of maidens lie down and drowse. While they nap, lizard and beetles join them, an invasion of humanity by nature as old as Dreamtime itself. It is even possible creatures we see are conjured up by the girls' dreams.

What Michael is doing at this point isn't clear. Is he still tracking Miranda? Or has he rejoined the alternative picnickers, Colonel Fitzhubert and his wife?

Upon awakening, the girls resume vertical travels away from their associates. They stop again, reform into Indian-file trio, then disappear into a cleft. Minus Edith. Her cries of cautioning to Miranda go unheeded. Are the lead three so immersed in private speculations they don't hear their comrade? Or do they find her too great a spoilsport to tolerate, her constant grumpiness an irritating reminder of what they reject.

Edith emits a primal scream, one calling to mind Edvard Munch's famed painting. It is repeated, serially, as she dashes frantically downhill. What did she see just before her outcry? Merely a vanishing? Or something inexplicable, supernatural, completely alien to her experience?

Time passes. Travellers do not get back to the College by an appointed hour of eight. Darkness has fallen, plunging Mrs. Appleyard and institutional

underlings into gloomy thoughts. Has there been some accident? Is entertainment out in the back country so rollicking everyone lost track of time?

No, it is not fun and games that cause delay. Something happened that nobody planned. Three girls are missing, lost out in the wilderness. One escort has also disappeared: stodgy Miss McCraw.

The dream has become a horror. No one has seen or heard any of the four recently. Not for hours. What has become of them? Edith, a sobbing, traumatized wreck, can give no insights. The only male present, no more resistant to slumber than females, saw nothing amiss. Mademoiselle de Poitiers, a responsible adult supervisor, also has no clues to share.

Mrs. Appleyard must feel surrounded by fools. Or demons.

Like Antonioni's *L'AVVENTURA*, where a young lady gone missing precipitates closer inspection of bonds among remaining excursion members on an isolated island, *PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK* focusses on aftereffects of unexpected loss. In both films, initial searches turn up no revelations. While the Antonioni film then settles into interpersonal drama, Peter Weir's Australian cliffhanger expands into social commentary. One inexplicable event follows another, in an accumulating crescendo empty of resolution.

What is the true connection between Sara and Miranda? Does Marion locate what she desires? Is the impromptu exit of Miss McCraw related somehow to Hanging Rock? What significance is the reappearance of Irma, rendered amnesiac, with torn fingernails and scratched face suggestive of either parried crime or ferocious battle with resistant nature? Why is Michael unable to establish a friendly relationship with Irma? Does Mrs. Appleyard overstep boundaries of her moral authority in her treatment of Sara? Is Albert's dream about his sister merely a dream? What role, if any, do Aborigines play in these events?

Use these questions as springboards into the film's second half. Keep in mind that director Weir and screenwriter Green intended to increase mystification there, not diminish it. Sparse characterization was intentional. Atmosphere ruled. Not the kind found in sunny opening scenes, either.

Much of *PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK*'s international fame is due to its music. Teaming standards culled from Beethoven, Mozart, Johann Sebastian Bach, and

Tchaikovsky with gypsy strains composed by George Zamfir results in fascinating faceoff between formal music structures and what sounds like pan pipe improvisations from folk traditions. This repeats the film's basic theme of convention versus novelty, restriction pitted against freedom.

Important as these musical tones are, equal force derives from natural sounds generated by the environment.

Peter Weir borrows a page, too, from *THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER*, another film where children find nature more benevolent than incompetent human guardians. Their trip downriver is an escape into a security and permanence denied them at home, where fear, sham, and menace are far greater. Like its Australian relative, *THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER* shows nature as it is, making no moral or social judgments, following its own principles, freed from subjugation to ticking watches and human attempts to domesticate it. In both motion pictures, violence and viciousness lurk not far below respectable veneers of human countenances. Darkness concocted in mortal minds matches anything nature openly displays.

David Copping and Judith Dorsman pair to create a masterful evocation of late Victorian decor and fashion. Their color choices are perfect. Virginal white envelopes four hiking girls in a first communion purity. Funereal black wraps Mrs. Appleyard in a shroud fabricated from her own haughtiness. Prevailing earth tones for clothing of townspeople suggest a John Ford western. This is neatly contradicted by action on screen, where citizen behavior is confused, chaotic, counterproductive. Hardly the bulwark of morality and communal solidarity featured in studio-era American frontier dramas.

While luminosity of exterior lighting is uniformly commendable, interiors are sometimes underlit. This undercuts splendid achievements realized by the art department.

Music recording is consistently excellent across an extremely wide range of volume levels. Not so dialogue recording, with whispered passages occasionally trailing off into inaudibility.

Top acting accolade must go to Anne-Louise Lambert, who invests Miranda copiously with grace and ethereal charisma, difficult qualities to project. Also notable is Jackie Weaver's compassionate maid and Helen Morse's well-

intentioned, frequently miscalculating Mademoiselle de Poitiers, whose overabundant optimism blinds her to darker undercurrents in associates.

Harder to accept are a multitude of other performances. Some are too sketchy, others inordinately bizarre, such as Peter Collingwood's dotty Colonel Fitzhubert and Rachel Roberts' grotesquely sadistic Mrs. Appleyard. Since many of the young women tapped to portray classmates of Miranda were complete amateurs, according to Peter Weir, their performances are hampered by lack of dramatic experience. Little dialogue was assigned to them for that very reason, a virtue stemming from necessity. This pushed more of the burden for credibility onto the cinematographer.

Russell Boyd was certainly up to the challenge, formulating one museum caliber composition after another, setting a standard for beauty still not surpassed in Australian film. He received tremendous reinforcement from David Sanderson's unforgettably vivid shots of vegetation and animal life. His own lensings of Hanging Rock itself kept intact essential qualities of timeless introvertedness. This Rock is clearly property with secrets no human rationalizer will ever fathom.

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK, with an official MPAA rating of PG, is acceptable viewing for teens and adults not glued to easy resolutions of difficult problems. It's very highly recommended on the basis of stunning cinematography, spellbinding music, and consistent unwillingness to explain anything. Watch and wonder.

Criterion's 1998 dvd release is accompanied by a favorable critical review published by Vincent Canby after his screening of its first American theatrical release. There is also a suggestively inviting four-and-one-quarter minute trailer rich in seductively transcendent music and gossamer cinematography.

If you love mystery in cinema, don't pass this film up.

Kino Ken wishes to acknowledge his gratitude to netflowers.wordpress.com for clarification of some plot points, to www.bookmice.net/darkchild for untangling the chronology of events in Joan Lindsay's original novel, to Brad Brevet at www.ropeofsilicon for theories about possible religious underpinnings of the film, and to www.imdb.com for quotes from the movie and production credits.

