

## **The Trouble with Merle\***

**Kate Cumming**

If Hollywood actress Merle Oberon was born in India, why would she attend a 'welcome home' ceremony at the Hobart Town Hall in 1978? Filmmaker Mareé Delofski discovers a great deal about celebrity, memory, identity, race and class in the competing life stories of Merle Oberon.

Local history, studio publicity and Fantale wrappers all identify actress Merle Oberon as a Tasmanian who moved to India before becoming a Hollywood star. Oberon rose to fame in the 1930s and 40s, starring in films such as *Wuthering Heights* (with Laurence Olivier), *Dark Angel* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. She was regarded as 'Australia's most glittering Hollywood actress' and 'a Tasmanian girl who made it big'. However a biography by Charles Higham published after her death discredits this story, claiming Oberon was born and raised in India.

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[http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/staterecords/docs/Vital\\_Signs\\_Issue\\_3\\_-\\_Merle.pdf](http://www.records.nsw.gov.au/staterecords/docs/Vital_Signs_Issue_3_-_Merle.pdf).

In *The Trouble with Merle*, filmmaker Mareé Delofski travels to Tasmania, India and Canada to unravel the story of Merle Oberon's heritage. Delofski's film tracing Oberon's convoluted past is a fascinating one. In addition to the poignant personal tale it tells, the film has much to say about records, history and identity. Identity is shown as a very malleable concept that can be confirmed or complicated by the record. Numerous records are sought in the film, but only a few are found. The missing records help to obscure the story, whilst the records that do exist are subject to interpretation.

Delofski begins her story in Tasmania. In a series of interviews she is told that Oberon was the illegitimate daughter of a Chinese woman, Lottie Chintock. These interviews provide extensive and extraordinary detail about the life Oberon is thought to have lived in Tasmania. Interviewees include the granddaughter of the midwife said to be present at Oberon's birth and descendants of Lottie Chintock. Photos of Lottie are upheld as evidence of her relationship with Merle Oberon, because of the strong physical resemblance they demonstrate. Hollywood publicity photographs are also proclaimed as further proof of Oberon's Chinese (and therefore Tasmanian) heritage. When added to the persuasive oral history, these records lend further credence to the Tasmanian folklore.

There are no official records, however, to substantiate these tales. Delofski visits the Archives Office of Tasmania and speaks to archivist Margaret Glover, who tells her that archivists have searched everywhere for records documenting Oberon's birth, but have found no evidence proving that she was born in Tasmania. This lack of records, this 'gap' in the archive's collection, complicates the story,

forcing a further reliance on oral histories and necessitating more complex research in India and Canada.

After several distracting leads and seeming dead-ends, Delofski meets Merle Oberon's nephew, Harry Selby. Selby has in his possession a copy of a birth certificate which indicates that Oberon was born Estelle May Thompson, an Anglo-Indian baby, in a poor area of Mumbai. The original record was apparently found amongst the thousands of certificates held by the Government Records Section in Mumbai. Whilst Selby sought the record to prove or disprove conclusively his family's connection to Oberon, the record entangles Selby's identity even further. Whilst confirming a family connection, the record also reveals that Oberon was not his aunt, as he had always believed, but his sister.

Merle Oberon was a product of the early Hollywood star system. Her mixed parentage was undesirable in this environment and so she was given a new name, family and origins. A new biography was created to document and legitimise this Hollywood star. Tasmania, one of the remotest outposts of the British Empire, was chosen as her birthplace. It was a story few could question and one that was maintained by Oberon herself virtually all her life. She even attended an official 'welcome home' celebration held by the Lord Mayor of Hobart in 1978. Delofski uses footage from the time and interviews to show Oberon's fear and discomfort in this situation. It became her last public appearance and she died a year later at the age of 68.

Merle Oberon's story shows how fragile our identities can be – shaped and reshaped by the records that are made and kept about us. In the

*Kate Cumming: The Trouble with Merle*

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film, records address certain questions surrounding Oberon's ancestry, but they are not repositories of all the answers. This, Delofski reveals, is the real truth of archives.

*The Trouble with Merle* is a Film Australia National Interest Program in Association with Seeview Pictures. Written and directed by Mareé Delofski, produced by David Noakes. The film was screened at the 2002 Sydney Film Festival and shown on ABC Television in August 2002.