



Mona Donaldson

Also Known As:
"Miss D"

Lived:
October 1901 - Unknown

Worked as:
booking clerk, editor, film censor, film cutter

Worked In:
Australia

by **Ina Bertrand**

In February 1915, at the tender age of fourteen, Mona Donaldson started to work for Australasian Films in Sydney as a film examiner. Two years later she moved to Paramount Pictures, first as a film examiner, then as a booking clerk. In 1921 she left that position to look after her ailing mother, but she had enjoyed the work, and when her sister was able to take on the caregiver role, she looked around for further work in the film industry. Because she had experience, she was able to obtain a position as a film cutter in what was then the largest film production enterprise in Sydney—Australasian Films. Already, she was building a reputation, both for competence and for independent spirit. When she found that her new employers were considering her job as temporary, she reminded them that the original advertisement had not stated that. When they suggested that her salary should be the same as it had been at Paramount, she insisted that it was a more responsible position and she deserved a higher salary. She won on both counts (Wright 47; Donaldson).

In a 1980s interview deposited at the National Film and Sound Archive, she described herself as a perfectionist who believed that “near enough wasn’t good enough,” and recalled how she had often worked unpaid overtime, sometimes all night. Her social life suffered, and she acquired a reputation for being rather formal and distant. Even among close colleagues she was “Miss D” rather than Mona. Editing was at that time considered to be suitable work for a woman, requiring the same sort of hand-eye coordination as cutting out a dress pattern, but neither particularly skilled nor particularly creative. Most of her early work at Australasian Films with filmmakers such as Alexis Albert, Frank Hurley, or Arthur Shirley was not credited on-screen. In the 1980s interview with Andrée Wright and Stuart Young, she describes cutting on *Painted Daughters* (1925) for F. Stuart Whyte; *The Grey Glove* (1928) and *Tall Timber* (1926) for Dunstan Webb;

and *Hills of Hate* (1926) and *The Pioneers* (1926) for Raymond Longford—all without screen credit. When the company moved to Bondi Junction, she found herself working near Gayne Dexter, who did all the title sequences. It was he who first gave her a screen credit although she was not clear in her interview which film this might have been.

The first film for which her editing was clearly recognized was Norman Dawn's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927). The original editing was credited to Katherine Dawn, but it was well known that Mona Donaldson completed the film after the Dawns returned to America. So when Graham Shirley reconstructed the film for the National Film and Sound Archive, he gave a credit to Mona Donaldson as well. When the Dawns returned to Australia to make *The Adorable Outcast* (1928), they invited Mona to edit the film, this time for full screen credit. On *Showgirl's Luck* (1931) Mona did the final cut, but did not prepare the work print. She remained good friends with the Dawns, resisting their invitations to work in the United States because her mother needed her, she said, but maintaining a correspondence with Katherine Dawn for thirty-five years (Donaldson).

Around this time, Lacey Percival, who had also worked at Australasian Films, started Automatic Films, and invited Mona to join him. She told Australasian, hoping they would be interested enough in her to offer her a raise, but they said her salary was ample for a woman, so she accepted the new job around 1928 and remained there for eighteen years. She explains in her one interview that she found the transition to sound easy, saying that she “drifted into it without any bother.” However, during the depression in the early thirties, Lacey Percival asked her, along with Phil Markham, to take a cut in salary. They were puzzled by this since they were working flat out all through those years that were so difficult for others; however, she agreed to having her salary cut by £5 per week, only to discover later that it had not been necessary at all.

Automatic Film Laboratories also loaned her out to work on feature films. Charles Chauvel had had *Heritage* (1935) cut by Lola Thring-Lindsay, but he was not pleased with the result and asked Lacey Percival if “one of the boys” could “have a look at it.” Percival explained that “Miss D” did all their editing, so Chauvel asked Mona to look at the film. She recommended changes, and he told her to recut it completely. *Heritage* won the Australian Film Award in 1935. Chauvel was so impressed that he asked for her again on *Uncivilised* (1936). They did not take her to Suva for the filming because they needed her expertise in Sydney to check all the footage and let them know if something needed to be reshot on location. Mona was also loaned out by Automatic to National Studios for Clarence Badger's *Rangle River* (1936). After that film, her work was mainly that of checking final prints and cutting films submitted to the censorship boards.

Donaldson became very ill in 1946 and spent seven months in the hospital. In her oral history she recalled that when the management at Automatic refused her sick leave and told her that she no longer had a job if she was too ill to work, she was hurt. She had spent eighteen years with the firm, and in that time had never received payment for overtime and had even brought printing as well as work to the firm. Looking back, she told her interviewers about how she met news cameraman Bill Carty some time later, and he greeted her enthusiastically, but recalled that

although “Miss D was always finding fault,” this actually made the job easier for everyone. Both Cinesound and Commonwealth Film Laboratories invited her to work for them, but she decided to leave the film industry permanently. She bought a shop in Chatswood and became a successful milliner.

Bibliography

Pike, Andrew and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Wright, Andrée. *Brilliant Careers: Women in Australian Cinema*. Sydney: Pan Books Australia, 1986.

Archival Paper Collections:

Donaldson, Mona. Interview with Andrée Wright and Stuart Young. 274184. n.d. [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Mona Donaldson as Editor

For the Term of His Natural Life. Dir./prod./sc.: Norman Dawn, ed.: Katherine Dawn and Mona Donaldson (Union Master World Picture Australia 1926) si, b&w, 16mm (993 ft.), 35mm (6,500 ft.). Archive: [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia \[AUC\]](#).

The Adorable Outcast. Dir./prod./ sc.: Norman Dawn, ed.: Mona Donaldson (Australasian Films Australia 1928) si, b&w, 16mm (993 ft.), 35mm (6,500 ft.). Archive: [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia \[AUC\]](#).

The Grey Glove. Dir.: Dunstan Webb, ed.: Mona Donaldson. (Australia 1928) si, b&w, 16 mm (993 ft.), 35mm (6,500 ft.). Archive: [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia \[AUC\]](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Mona Donaldson as Editor

Painted Daughters, 1925; *Hills of Hate*, 1926; *The Pioneers*, 1926; *Tall Timber*, 1926.

Credit Report

Donaldson edited the following titles, but was not credited for them: *Painted Daughters* (1925); *Tall Timber* (1926); *Hills of Hate* (1926); *The Pioneers* (1926); and *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927).

Citation

Bertrand, Ina. "Mona Donaldson." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013.
<<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-mona-donaldson/>>