

# THE CHIFLEYS OF BUSBY STREET

*... a community remembers*



A **STUDY GUIDE** BY ROBERT LEWIS



<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>



SCREEN  
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<http://www.theeducationshop.com.au>

*The Chifleys of Busby Street* (Andrew Pike, 2008) is a 72-minute 'people's documentary' of Ben Chifley and his wife, Elizabeth. The film takes us to key places in Chifley's life – his home at Bathurst, other Bathurst sites associated with his political and personal experiences, his hotel room in Canberra – and we hear from nearly fifty people who have memories of him.



ABOVE: THE CHIFLEYS WITH THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL, THE DUKE OF GLOUCESTER, IN 1945  
BELOW: FILMMAKERS ROBIN MCLACHLAN (L) AND ANDREW PIKE (R)

The film tells us about Chifley, but it also raises issues about how we know about him, the nature of evidence, especially oral evidence, and the problems caused by people's 'misremembering' events or details.

It also raises important questions about interpreting objects and heritage sites, and the ways different generations can see the same objects differently, and draw different messages and meanings from them.

## INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

### Thinking about a biography

Who is the person in public life (that is, not your family or friends or someone you personally know) that you most like or admire?

Imagine that a friend of yours had never heard of that person, and asks

you 'What's so special about this person?' Answer your friend.

Chances are that you said something about the person's public achievements, about their private life, about their character and qualities, and about the feelings that this person evokes in you. You probably did not say anything critical about the person.

In creating your answer you would

### CURRICULUM APPLICABILITY

The film is a useful resource for middle–senior secondary students in:

- Australian history
- English
- Society and environment
- Politics
- Media/Creative Arts.



have drawn on a variety of information about the person that you have gathered over time.

What you have done is to create a biography.

And that's what you are going to be focusing on as you watch the film *The Chifleys of Busby Street* – what can we learn about a famous person and his achievements, and how do we know these things?



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BEN CHIFLEY WITH A HOLDEN; BEN CHIFLEY; ELIZABETH CHIFLEY; BEN CHIFLEY**

## EXPLORING IDEAS AND ISSUES IN THE FILM

### What does the film tell us about Chifley?

One of the reasons for watching a film about Chifley is to find out information about him, and to gain insights into his character, times and achievements.

Below sets out various periods of Chifley's life, and refers to some specific elements.

- As you watch the film add any information and details that the film supplies to any of these aspects.

#### Birth And Early Years

- What do we see as main influences shaping his life?

#### Activities Before Federal Politics

- What do we learn about his main ideas, attitudes and values?

#### Personal Life And Qualities

- What do we learn about the personal qualities of Chifley?

#### Political life

- What do we learn to explain why Chifley became prime minister?

#### As Prime Minister And After

- What was he trying to achieve?
- What were his main achievements and failures? Consider in particular:

##### 1945:

- Air Services nationalization
- Maintenance of petrol rationing

##### 1946:

- Immigration program
- Change to Constitution to cover increased social services
- Australia and the United Nations
- Establishment of the Australian National University

##### 1947:

- Bank nationalization attempts
- Social Services Act
- Establishment of ASIO
- Woomera Testing Range

##### 1948:

- Holden car

##### 1949:

- Coal miners' strike
- Snowy Hydro-electric Scheme
- Indonesian independence

##### General:

- Inflation
- Communist influence

#### Assessment

- How would you describe Chifley as a person and as a political leader?
- How would you summarize his

success and achievements, given the context of the time?

### Finding out about Chifley

How does the film use evidence, and how reliable is that evidence?

#### Oral history

In the film we see many people pro-

TYPE OF ORAL HISTORY	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Eyewitnesses		
Family stories		
Second-hand stories		

viding information and views about Chifley.

- 1 Give one example of each of the following types of evidence that we see in the film, and suggest what its main strengths and weaknesses are. See table above.
- 2 Why do people pass on these stories?
- 3 We see the film deliberately challenge two of these stories – the ‘abandoned train’ story, and the ‘butcher’s phone number’ story. How can true stories be distinguished from false ones?

### ‘The Light on the Hill’

A number of people in the film are asked for their understanding of what Ben Chifley meant by ‘The Light on the Hill’. This phrase comes from a speech he made to the NSW Labor Party Conference in June 1949. The speech has since become a guiding statement for Labor politicians. But what does it mean? Read the speech (inset right) and answer the questions that follow.

- 4 What do you think are the main messages of this speech?
- 5 If you had to select a key quote, what would it be?
- 6 In the film several people say what they think the speech means. Why do you think people can take different meanings or messages from the same source?

“ I have had the privilege of leading the Labor Party for nearly four years. They have not been easy times and it has not been an easy job. It is a man-killing job and would be impossible if it were not for the help of my colleagues and members of the movement.

No Labor Minister or leader ever has an easy job. The urgency that rests behind the Labor movement, pushing it on to do things, to create new conditions, to reorganise the economy of the country, always means that the people who work within the Labor movement, people who lead, can never have an easy job. The job of the evangelist is never easy.

Because of the turn of fortune’s wheel your Premier (Mr McGirr) and I have gained some prominence in the Labor movement. But the strength of the movement cannot come from us. We may make plans and pass legislation to help and direct the economy of the country. But the job of getting the things the people of the country want comes from the roots of the Labor movement – the people who support it.

When I sat at a Labor meeting in the country with only ten or fifteen men there, I found a man sitting beside me who had been working in the Labor movement for fifty-four years. I have no doubt that many of you have been doing the same, not hoping for any advantage from the movement, not hoping for any personal

gain, but because you believe in a movement that has been built up to bring better conditions to the people. Therefore, the success of the Labor Party at the next elections depends entirely, as it always has done, on the people who work.

I try to think of the Labor movement, not as putting an extra sixpence into somebody’s pocket, or making somebody Prime Minister or Premier, but as a movement bringing something better to the people, better standards of living, greater happiness to the mass of the people. We have a great objective – the light on the hill – which we aim to reach by working the betterment of mankind not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand. If it were not for that, the Labor movement would not be worth fighting for.

If the movement can make someone more comfortable, give to some father or mother a greater feeling of security for their children, a feeling that if a depression comes there will be work, that the government is striving its hardest to do its best, then the Labor movement will be completely justified.

It does not matter about persons like me who have our limitations. I only hope that the generosity, kindness and friendliness shown to me by thousands of my colleagues in the Labor movement will continue to be given to the movement and add zest to its work. ”

J.B. CHIFLEY SPEECH TO THE NSW LABOR PARTY CONFERENCE, 12 JUNE 1949, <<http://australianpolitics.com/parties/alp/chifley-light-on-hill.shtml>>



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CHIFLEY'S CHAIR, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA; INTERVIEWEE JOHN STUART-SMITH; SAM MALLOY, CURATOR OF THE CHIFLEY HOME, AND GARDENING ENTHUSIAST LYN LOWE PLANT PETUNIAS AT THE CHIFLEY HOME IN BUSBY STREET; CAMERAMAN SCOTT WOMBEY

## Significant places

We visit many places that are significant to Chifley's life.

- 7 List as many of these places as you can remember.
- 8 How many of them are still as they would have been in Chifley's time?
- 9 Does the existence of these places help you to gain knowledge, understanding and empathy with the Chifleys?
- 10 How could this be used as an argument to support the maintenance of heritage sites in history?

## Significant objects

- 11 List the private objects that you recall seeing in the film.
- 12 Why do people treasure objects that are associated with a famous person?
- 13 Are these objects significant as evidence of that person's life?
- 14 Some of the objects are special, such as the aeroplane pipe-holder; others are totally ordinary and apparently insignificant, such as Elizabeth Chifley's scone tray. If you were a museum curator and could only display a limited number of these objects how would you decide which ones to display?
- 15 Objects can have different mean-



ings over time. For example, what does a pipe mean to you today? If a person smokes a pipe, what does it mean?

However, people in Chifley's day might have looked at the same thing, a man smoking a pipe, and seen a different message.

The filmmakers say this about Chifley and his pipes:

*His pipe was Ben Chifley's personal trademark in the public arena of politics. It is said that he gave up cigarettes in favour of the pipe because it made one look more 'trustworthy'. This happened sometime in the 1930s and was*

*done, or so it is said, on the advice of the Abercrombie Shire Clerk, also a pipe smoker. Chifley also found that having a pipe allowed him an acceptable excuse to pause while pondering a tricky question – filling and tamping the tobacco, lighting and drawing on the pipe – before replying. It was a very useful prop for a politician! But his pipe also seems to have become a symbol in his lifetime of his caring attitude towards others, and his values in general. The pipe offered a message that this is a man who we can rely on and trust, and this was in a time of war and economic hardship. The pipe was symbolic of the man's character.*

- 16 Why do you think symbols can change meaning over time?

## The film as a representation of history

The film is a representation of history – that is, it is the filmmaker's version of events. The filmmaker has chosen what to include and what to exclude, how the material is organized, what sound and sound effects will be heard, and so on. We need to understand how the film has been constructed, and what effects this has on us and



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: INTERVIEWEE ALAN MCRAE; INTERVIEWEE IRENE KOPIEVSKY; SAM MALLOY, CURATOR OF THE CHIFLEY HOME, WITH STUDENTS FROM SOUTH BATHURST PRIMARY SCHOOL; INTERVIEWEE BRIAN BURKE



the way we receive and respond to this version of the Chifley story.

This film is not a conventional biographical documentary about a former Prime Minister. The filmmakers call the film an example of ‘people’s history’ or ‘community history’ or a reflection of ‘community memory’. Look at the following elements to understand the differences in this film to more conventional film biographies, and to develop some judgements about it.

### Addressing controversial issues

The film refers several times to rumours and gossip, such as Chifley’s role in the 1917 strike, and Chifley’s possible affair with his secretary.

- 1 How does the film handle such information?
- 2 Should such information be used in a film?
- 3 How does the inclusion of this material affect the overall message or meaning of the film?

### Archival material

The film makes relatively little use of the wealth of photos and film footage that exist in national archival collections.

- 4 How does this affect your experience of the film?

The film often uses photos when they are being discussed by the interviewee, rather than as inserts or overlays (although the film also does do this from time to time).

- 5 How does this affect your experience of the film?

The filmmakers have strong views about the way in which history is often told on film and were trying, when possible, to avoid the use of archival material as ‘decoration’, using it instead as on-screen ‘evidence’.

- 6 Does this have an effect on your experience of the film?

### Reconstructions

The film avoids the sort of reconstructions that are common in history documentaries – but uses extracts from the play, *A Local Man*, as another form of information.

- 7 What effect does the use of the extracts from the play have on your experience of the film?

### Narrator

There is no ‘voice-of-God’ authoritative narrator.

- 8 What effect does this have on an individual viewer’s experience of the film?
- 9 Does it allow people to make their own judgements, or are the interviews and the presentation such that we really all react the same way?
- 10 If there had been a narrator, whose voice could the narrator have been? Consider different possible narrators – Voice of God authority; a member of the Bathurst community; one of



TOP: INTERVIEWEE MATTHEW HIGGINS FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA  
 BOTTOM: INTERVIEWEE, THE LATE PETER ANDREN, M.P.

the filmmakers; etc) and how that might impact on the film.

### Identification of interviewees

The film identifies only a few of the interviewees. Television documentaries usually identify every speaker, sometimes each time they appear. In this case, the names would not mean anything to viewers. The filmmakers' intention was to encourage the view that the speakers were representative of the community and hence did not need to be identified as individuals unless they had a family relationship to the Chifleys or held some form of official position.

11 Do you think the filmmakers were right to adopt this practice? Or does it limit your ability to make a judgement about the nature of the information being presented?

There are few expert voices used in the film as authoritative commentators.

12 Do you think this adds to or detracts from your ability to learn about and make judgements about Chifley?

### Overall

13 If a person had little knowledge of Ben Chifley and saw this film, do you think this viewer is likely to be



getting a fair, full and authoritative picture of Chifley?

### Remembering and memorialising

There are many memorials to Chifley that we see in the film.

- 1 List as many of these as you can remember.
- 2 What is the purpose of a memorial?
- 3 How well do the memorials that you have listed carry out this function?
- 4 Are there any important ideas or aspects of Chifley that you think are not included in the existing memorials? If so, how could they be included?
- 5 Drawing on what you have seen and heard in the film, why do you think Ben Chifley is often remembered as Australia's 'best-loved' Prime Minister?

### Further information

*The Chifleys of Busby Street* is published by Ronin Films.

For more detail on Ben Chifley see:

#### The Chifley Home

A museum that is host to a vast amount of Chifley material. The house on Busby Street was Ben's quiet retreat during his years in parliament. Today, the five roomed house contains the original furnishings and many personal effects of Ben and Elizabeth Chifley as well as significant memorabilia of the Chifley era. <<http://www.chifleyhome.org.au>>

#### A Local Man

An excellent play about Chifley co-authored by Bob Ellis and Dr Robin McLachlan. The play is set in the Chifley home, just before Chifley's death. He reminisces about key moments in his life. An excellent resource for English. Published by Currency Press and available from Ronin Films.

#### National Archives of Australia

<http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/meetpm.asp?pmId=16>

#### National Museum of Australia

[http://www.nma.gov.au/education/school\\_resources/websites\\_and\\_interactives/primeministers/ben\\_chifley/](http://www.nma.gov.au/education/school_resources/websites_and_interactives/primeministers/ben_chifley/)

#### Australian Prime Ministers Centre, Old Parliament House

<http://www.apmc.oph.gov.au/lib/docs/16%20Chifley%20Web.pdf>

#### Australian Dictionary of Biography online

<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A130460b.htm>



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P.O. Box 1005 Civic Square A.C.T. 2608 AUSTRALIA

ph: (02) 6248-0851 fax: (02) 6249-1640

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**editor@atom.org.au**

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