

Film/Cinema (Australia)

By [Daniel Reynaud](#)

Summary

Australian cinema experienced a war of two halves during 1914-1918. The start was dominated by war dramas funded through private enterprise, telling sensational stories largely derived from British military traditions, and creating valuable free propaganda for the government. When their popularity died suddenly in early 1916, government-sponsored war documentaries took over, serving as both info-propaganda and fundraisers for the war effort. Post-war, cinema was a key propagator of the evolving Anzac legend, with its distinctively Australian identity. Its growing potency as the central national myth was most effectively articulated through cinema in the 1980s.

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Introduction

Studies on Australian war cinema have mostly focused on films about the Great War.

Relatively little has been written on the handful of war films covering other conflicts. Partly this is because the Great War is so central to Australian national mythology that other wars have mattered much less in the national consciousness. This article looks at how Australian cinema engaged with the Great War, both during and after the war, pointing out how the cinema has both reflected and shaped popular opinion about the war. It is organised into four sections, each covering a distinctive period in the evolution of Australian cinema about the Great War.

Popular drama propaganda: Early Australian war cinema August 1914-January 1916

[Australia](#)'s small domestic pre-war industry struggled against the quality of imported movies mostly from Europe, with American cinema also contributing. The war hit European film production very hard, creating a gap on Australian cinema screens. This was most effectively filled by Hollywood movies, but Australian producers, having experienced a decline from their peak production days of 1911-1912, could meet the specific demand for popular patriotics.

Early releases

As an instant reaction to the declaration of war, a documentary was hastily assembled titled *Australia's Response to the Empire's Call*, and released in cinemas in August 1914. Two Australian war films in November 1914, *A Long, Long Way to Tipperary* and *The Day*, were very derivative of imported British war films, with heroic British officers exposing [spy networks](#) and defeating [atrocious](#)-committing Germans. By 1915, Australia's largest film company, Australasian Films, recognized that it could deflect accusations of monopolistic practice by making [propaganda](#) movies. It released a short recruiting film, *Will They Never Come?*, in April 1915, featuring an effete bookworm who proved his manliness on the battlefields of [France](#), winning attention from the girls over his sporty younger brother. The film proved to be very popular. It was followed by a feature-length sequel directed by the innovative [Alfred Rolfe \(1862-1943\)](#), *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, released in July 1915. The movie told a dramatic story of the sportsman brother enlisting, training, and then scaling the cliffs at Gallipoli, wrestling a Turk down into the sea, and winning his girl. It was a huge box office and critical hit, and was the first film to capitalize on the sensational news of the successful landing of the [ANZACs](#) at [Gallipoli](#) in April 1915. Audiences and critics alike considered it to be a realistic portrayal of events, despite its unlikely plot. A partial reconstruction of this film exists in Australia's National Film and Sound archives.

Just two days later, Australasian's rival J. C. Williamson Ltd. released its own Gallipoli film, *Within Our Gates*. Like *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, it was made with full cooperation of the military authorities, with many of its extras really soldiers-in-training, soon to find themselves

at Gallipoli. It adopted the staple devices of British war films, with a spy ring and German warships cruising off the coast. More melodramatic than Rolfe's film, it was also hugely popular.

All three films remained in the cinemas for months, despite the usual weekly turnaround for films. They were considered to be very useful in increasing recruitment numbers. They also encouraged the production of more war dramas – patriotism had never been so profitable! In December 1915, the two companies released rival productions about the same event on the same day: the sinking of the German cruiser [SMS Emden](#) by *HMAS Sydney*, which had happened a year earlier. Again, Rolfe's production, *How We Beat the Emden*, was done with some subtlety and skill, telling the story in flashbacks through the eyes of a young sailor, while the J. C. Williamson film, *For Australia*, was a clumsy melodrama, complete with more clichéd spies and German warships, and the added spice of a dusky maiden on tropical shores and a literally wooden crocodile to eat the villain. Surprisingly, despite borrowing the traditions of British martial history with its emphasis on naval supremacy, Australia failed to integrate its first successful sea battle into its national myth, though these two films were financially successful. As was common for the period, actuality footage was incorporated into many of these early war films, including footage from a documentary of the wrecked *Emden* in *How We Beat the Emden*. An edited compilation of these two films survives.

High tide

In January 1916, another film company released *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell*, a cheap, hastily-assembled melodrama drawing on the recent execution of a British nurse who helped [prisoners of war](#) escape from [Belgium](#). The film played loosely with the facts, blowing the story into a full-scale melodrama as thuggish German officers with Kaiser Bill moustaches harassed and then shot the saintly beautiful young nurse. It was a hugely popular film, making its director [John Gavin \(1875-1938\)](#) a fortune and encouraging others to take the plunge into war movie-making. Within a short time, two other films tried to cash in on the story of [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#), while another was made of the life of the Gallipoli stretcher-bearer [John Simpson Kirkpatrick \(1892-1915\)](#), titled *Murphy of Anzac*, who had been made posthumously famous in Australia to boost recruiting.

However, a crucial corner in public opinion had been turned. As the lists of war casualties grew in the papers, and the government became more aggressive in hunting up recruits, people became less enamoured of the movies' obvious propaganda, while still wishing to stay informed of events in Europe. The audiences for war movies collapsed dramatically after February 1916, while public demand grew for hard news via the papers and the new documentaries that British authorities had finally been persuaded to make. The propagandist

elements of the newer Cavell films, as well as *Murphy of Anzac* and another big production, *The Joan of Arc of Loos*, were unfavourably noted in reviews, and the box office returns were mediocre at best. While the documentaries were still propaganda films, they seemed more real and less manipulative than the movies.

Australia's orientation towards Britain is evident in these early war films. Not only were they derivative in plot; several of the films had no Australian theme at all, showing British or French heroines, and these were as likely to be profitable as the ones on local subjects. As long as they were profitable, they served the needs not only of the film industry but also of the government, for they provided cheap propaganda.

Documentaries and dramas 1916-1918

Australia was a little later than Britain in turning to government-sponsored documentary propaganda, but put it to more diverse ends. Prime Minister [William Hughes \(1862-1952\)](#) used some of them to promote his aggressive conscription referendum campaigns of 1916 and 1917, while later in the war they were used for a mix of fundraising, recruiting and general propaganda. Films were often cut and recut by local authorities until the original identity was completely lost.

First official documentaries

In July 1916, Australasian Films released a documentary feature, *Australia Prepared*, commissioned by the government, which imitated its British namesake *Britain Prepared*. This film, which showed scenes of soldiers training, munitions factories and the navy on manoeuvres, was a critical and commercial success. At the same time, New South Wales Premier [William Holman \(1871-1934\)](#) commissioned a series of short animated films on Anzac themes, including some from renowned artist [Norman Lindsay \(1879-1969\)](#), to support his re-election campaign.

Propaganda was increasingly important to the federal government after the loss of the 1916 Conscription Referendum and the split in the Labor Party over the issue. With the private cinema sector less interested in war subjects after the flops of early 1916, the government systematically acquired war documentaries from Britain. Public demand for information about Australian troops led to two official cinematographers, Captains [George Wilkins \(1888-1958\)](#) and [Frank Hurley \(1885-1962\)](#), being commissioned to film in France and Palestine. Such a move demonstrated the power of the people in influencing the nature of government propaganda, and reinforces the view that the public sways propaganda more than is realised.¹ The two captains produced a string of documentaries about the Australian forces.

Soon the Australian government had a regular supply of war documentary films, which were required screenings at cinemas. Exhibitors seemed happy to cooperate: actually, they could not afford to do otherwise. One cinema chain reported its full cooperation with the authorities to promote recruiting, showing daily the required films supplied by the government.² Accused from some quarters of disloyalty, the exhibition industry publicised its support for the war, running photos and stories of industry figures who had volunteered, and claiming that screening many Hollywood war movies, which in fact had been acquired automatically under block-booking arrangements with American studios, was their contribution to maintaining support for the war. And when light entertainment displaced war movies later in the war, the industry made a virtue of the fact by proclaiming that the movies provided a haven of relief from the horrors of war.³

War movie failures and comic bushman success

Attempts to produce popular war movies failed when *The Murder of Captain Fryatt*, another Gavin film based on a true story, and the alarmist [Franklyn Barrett \(1873-1964\)](#) film *Australia's Peril*, again replete with German warships and spy networks, were released in 1917. Gavin's film told of the execution of a merchant marine captain who had been executed by the Germans, while Barrett's film hysterically attempted to persuade audiences that the Germans were about to invade Australia and commit atrocities here. Neither gained box-office traction despite hyperbolic reviews for the latter film. It appeared that the all-pervasive [censorship](#) prevented reviewers from stating their real opinions about the artistic merit of war films, as only the most laudatory reviews were published regardless of the quality of the movie.

By contrast, another filmmaker had found the popular taste. [Beaumont Smith \(1885-1950\)](#) began his series of *Hayseeds* films in March 1917. With their bush settings and rustic outback characters, they spawned sequels and imitators in the Waybacks and Dad-n'-Dave series. In keeping with the old showman adage that 'when times are tough, produce comedy,' audiences were demanding escapist fare, and a return to Australian bush comedies met the need.

The death of the war documentary

Public apathy towards unrestrained enthusiasm for the war continued to grow, partly in response to government excesses during the second Conscription Referendum campaign of November 1917. Hughes controlled every possible avenue of propaganda, including specially commissioned films that he compelled cinemas to screen. Audiences reacted with hooting and cheering, bringing protests from exhibitors who wished to avoid such polarising issues for

fear of losing patrons, especially the more respectable clients who had begun to patronise the cinema to see official war films.⁴ The power of documentaries lasted about a year longer than that of dramas. By mid-1917, two war documentaries, *The Battle of the Ancre* and *The AIF in France*, had raised over 7,600 pounds for the Repatriation Fund.⁵ Encouraged, the Fund purchased *Sons of the Empire* in mid-1917 but lost over 2,000 pounds due to poor box office returns, and losses continued to mount over screenings of other films as well. By 1918, only one copy of Hurley's *With the Light Horse in Palestine* was ordered, due to lack of demand.⁶ This situation closely mirrored the trend in England, although the Australian trend lagged about six months behind that of Britain.

Unexpected drama success

Two movies in 1918 managed to buck the trend. *The Enemy Within* and Beaumont Smith's *Satan in Sydney*, released in July 1918, should have failed because both were premised on the well-worn idea of fifth columnists in Australia. But clever marketing sold the first as 'not a war film' and starred legendary athlete/stuntman [Reginald "Snowy" Baker \(1884-1953\)](#) as the hero unmasking traitorous groups, while the second was marketed as 'uncut by the censors,' attracting audiences to its promise of plenty of vice to deplore. It also appealed strongly to Australian racism by associating anti-war groups with Asian opium dens.

Anzac movies between the wars 1919-1940

Between the wars, Australian war cinema had to negotiate various difficulties: a reluctance from audiences to revisit the war's traumas, the demise of local production in the face of Hollywood monopolies and the expensive change to new sound technologies, and the pressure from interwar Australian governments to present the war in a positive light. Unlike Europe, which produced a corpus of anti-war art, the Australian government actively combated such an attitude, which threatened the heart of the emerging Anzac legend, by which the government increasingly sought to identify the national soul. Australia's participation in the war was painted in a rosy, pro-British Empire light.

Anzac movies of the 1920s

A handful of movies with Anzac themes were produced in the decade after the war. Most of them were amateurishly inept, and reached limited audiences. The first, and best, was *Ginger Mick* (1920), a sequel to the huge hit of 1919, *The Sentimental Bloke*, based on the popular versifier [C. J. Dennis \(1876-1938\)](#). The working-class Ginger was The Bloke's friend, and despite initial resistance to enlisting, ended up on Gallipoli, where he died in battle. Despite the lengthy intertitles, it was also successful, appealing to its audiences with its authentic

Australian character.

Several undistinguished films followed: *The Digger Earl* (1924) was an attempt at a comedy, *The Spirit of Gallipoli* was an earnest attempt to communicate the Anzac spirit to a new generation, but remains most notable for preserving sequences from *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, and the German production *The Exploits of the Emden*, which had its Australian sequences remade by future directing great [Ken G. Hall \(1901-1994\)](#) in order to appeal to an Australian audience. What characterised all of these films was a growing interest in representing the Anzac as distinctively Australian, a move away from representations during the war where the Australian characters usually appeared very English. The Anzac Legend as a defining national myth helped motivate this trend.

Comic Anzacs of the 1930s

As in Europe, Australian producers found that a decade's perspective made Great War stories more nostalgically palatable, but also that comedy was the best format to make them popular. The increasing emphasis on distinctively Australian characters, increasingly based on the Australian bushman, helped to define the archetypal Anzac in popular culture. However, the representations of the English were treated with the same comic respect as the Australian characters, demonstrating the lingering links with empire that characterised the decades between the world wars. *Fellers* (1930) was a heavy-handed attempt at a Light Horse story set in Palestine, its only distinguishing features being the clumsy attempt at adding sound to the final ten minutes, and the use of [Arthur Tauchert \(1877-1933\)](#), the star of *The Sentimental Bloke*, as the idealised stout urban larrikin Anzac.

A better contender for Australia's first 'talkie' was *Diggers* (1931), based on a popular stage show featuring actor [Pat Hanna \(1888-1973\)](#) lean, comic bushman Anzac. Along with its sequel, *Diggers in Blighty* (1933), it proved moderately successful at the box office, even if its *mise-en-scene* was dreadfully cramped by the demands of the primitive new sound recording.

The crowning glory of the Anzac cinema to date was undoubtedly [Charles Chauvel \(1897-1959\)](#) *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (released in 1940, but begun in 1937), a tribute to his uncle's force of Light Horsemen in Palestine. It also established another Australian star, [Chips Rafferty \(1909-1971\)](#), who embodied the archetypal Australian in films for two decades. It was Australia's greatest film to date and a genuine international hit. Rafferty would star in Chauvel's World War Two movie *The Rats of Tobruk* (1944), playing a similar character to his earlier role.

Anzac films of this period accomplished several things: they entrenched a comic larrikin

bushman as the archetypical Anzac, they maintained a strong and loyal connection to Britain, and they established several actors in Anzac as icons of Australia: Tauchert, Hanna and Rafferty, each of whom exercised their status in the role of Anzacs.

The revival of Anzac cinema in the 1980s

After a long lull in film production, a growing [nationalism](#) in the 1960s and 1970s, warmly fostered by successive governments, saw a revival of Australian cinema. The new medium of television also provided a format for Australian content. A few attempts were made at representing the Great War during this time, anticipating the great decade of period filmmaking in Australia.

The new Anzac cinema

During the 1980s, a number of prominent Anzac productions were shown on Australian screens, helping to entrench a modern version of the Anzac legend in popular culture. By far the most influential was Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981), a handsome, haunting film that helped popularise the idea of the Anzacs as heroic but naïve victims of British stupidity. It probably shaped contemporary Australian opinion about the war more than any other single text. Also hugely popular was the mini-series *Anzacs* (1985), which traced the fate of a platoon of Victorian soldiers throughout the war. A somewhat melodramatic soap opera, it developed a large following, further reinforcing the image of the bushman Anzac versus the incompetent British. Paul Hogan's roguish charmer was another embodiment of the quintessential Anzac. Several other productions demonstrated more nuance and subtlety in their representations, but without the same popular impact. *1915* (1982), *A Fortunate Life* (1985), *Always Afternoon* (1988) and *The Alien Years* (1988) were four fine mini-series that could not change the simplistic version of Anzac that grew increasingly hegemonic.

The next twenty-five years

Despite the growing popularity of the Anzac legend in Australian society, and a burgeoning publishing industry on the subject, virtually no productions emerged on the topic for nearly twenty years. In all probability, filmmakers felt there was little new to say, for the Anzac story as told by *Gallipoli* and *Anzacs* still resonated with the public. In 2010, *Beneath Hill 60*, a new Anzac film, was released with moderate success, and an intimate anti-war television movie *An Accidental Soldier*, was screened in 2013. However, the centenary of the Anzac landings at Gallipoli in 2015 promises a new set of productions, including a mini-series set on Gallipoli.

The Anzac films of the 1980s have defined the shape of the modern Anzac legend, maintaining a currency with Australian audiences for decades. The relative absence of

productions since then is not due to any decline in public interest; on the contrary, the Anzac legend grows in popularity and strength.

Conclusion

War cinema played an important but often unheralded role during the Great War, acting as vital propaganda, firstly through the approximately twenty dramas generated by the private sector, then through an unknown number of documentaries commissioned by the government. The dramas represented a significant and at times influential investment in the public discourse about the war, and their representations largely conformed to the norms of the times, with the Australians portrayed in ways indistinguishable from their English cousins. The documentaries foregrounded the role of the Australians and, during the period of their popularity, provided a very useful source of revenue for several official war-related activities. However, in the end, both drama and documentary propaganda demonstrated the limits of their power to sway the masses; propaganda requires the cooperation of its audiences in order to work, and Australians were weary of a war-saturated media.

Australian war cinema has both reflected and promoted popular attitudes to the Great War. It capitalized on early enthusiasm for war dramas, before turning to war documentaries for information and light-hearted comedies for relief. A more identifiably Australian attitude slowly evolved during the war, restrained by Imperialist loyalist sentiment fiercely enforced by the government. Post-war, the distinctive Anzac gradually evolved from the stocky urban larrikin of *Ginger Mick* to the lean, languorous bushman first evident in *Diggers* and now *de rigeur* in Australian productions, while a shift from pro-British to anti-British attitudes emerged more clearly by the 1970s. In the 1980s, Australian films powerfully articulated an increasingly popularised Anzac legend of noble but irreverent bushman Anzacs succeeding despite the British high command, or dying heroic deaths because of them.

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Notes

1. Reeves, Nicholas: *The Power of Film Propaganda. Myth of Reality?* London et al. 1999, pp. 31f, 38. [↑](#)
2. Reynaud, Daniel: The effectiveness of Australian film propaganda for the war effort 1914-1918, in: *Screening the Past 20* (December 2006), online: [1]. [↑](#)
3. Reynaud, Daniel: *Celluloid Anzacs. The Great War through Australian Cinema*, Melbourne 2007, p. 70. [↑](#)
4. Shirley, Graham / Adams, Brian: *Australian Cinema. The First Eighty Years*, Sydney

1989, p. 47. ↑

5. Reynaud, Effectiveness of Australian film 2006. ↑

6. Reynaud, Celluloid Anzacs 2007, p. 71. ↑

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External Links

- [Alfred Rolfe \(IMDB\) \(Article\)](#)
- [All titles produced by Australasian Films \(Australian Screen\) \(Database\)](#)
- [Australia Prepared \(Australian Screen\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Australia Prepared \(Australian War Memorial\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Beaumont Smith \(IMDB\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Clip from 'For Australia' \(Australian Screen\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Clip from 'How We Beat the Emden' \(Australian Screen\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Clips from "Diggers" \(Australian Screen\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Clips from "Forty Thousand Horsemen" \(Australian Screen\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Clips from "The Sentimental Bloke" \(Australian Screen\) \(Institutional Website\)](#)
- [Gallipoli on Film \(Australian Screen\) \(Article\)](#)
- [The Spirit of Gallipoli \(Australian Screen\) \(Article\)](#)

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[World War, 1914-1918--Australia ; World War, 1914-1918--Motion pictures and the war](#)

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[Hurley, Frank](#); [Wilkins, Hubert](#); [Hughes, William](#); [Holman, William](#); [Lindsay, Norman](#); [Dennis, C.J.](#); [Rolfe, Alfred](#); [Gavin, John](#); [Kirkpatrick, John Simpson](#); [Barrett, Franklyn](#); [Smith, Beaumont](#); [Baker, Reginald Snowy](#); [Hall, Ken G.](#); [Tauchert, Arthur](#); [Hanna, Pat](#); [Chauvel, Charles](#); [Rafferty, Chips](#); [Cavell, Edith Louisa](#)

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