

Film/Cinema (Great Britain)

By [Michael Paris](#)

Summary

This article explores how British cinematographers filmed the war and how the film industry, and later television, subsequently reflected and reinforced dominant public perceptions of the Great War. It is also suggested here that with the rising cost of film production, television has now become the main provider of visual interpretations of the war.

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Early Days

Since its development in the last decade of the 19th century, the cinema has become one of the most powerful forms of mass communication yet devised. Short primitive actuality films of the 1890s soon gave way to longer narrative films which, by 1914, were increasingly complex, technically sophisticated and hugely popular, particularly with the working classes. For those unsophisticated audiences what was on the screen was often believed to be “real.” Thus films were not just entertainment but an important source of information for audiences, a vital factor in shaping their worldview. Film interpreted great events, made sense of the world and was a particularly effective medium through which to bring the past to life. When war came in 1914, and despite the ever increasing popularity of the cinema, the [British government](#) saw little place for filmmakers in the war effort. The cinema was simply an indulgence for the pleasure of the lower classes. In the early months of the war, political and military elites had little idea of just how much they would come to need the collaboration of the whole population to achieve victory nor how powerful film could be as a weapon of mass persuasion. Initially, filmmakers found their offers of assistance in the war effort rejected

again and again. In September 1914 *Kine Weekly*, the foremost trade paper, was arguing that film was uniquely placed to “arouse patriotism.” A little later its rival journal, *The Bioscope*, suggested that citizens had the right to be informed about the conduct of the war and cinema, with its “ability to record the actual likeness of events,” was well placed to play this role.¹

Yet in those early months, footage of the war did appear on the screen. The newsreels were full of scenes of volunteers queuing outside recruiting stations, soldiers, laughing as they accepted cigarettes and flowers from the crowds of onlookers who cheered them on their way as they left their camps for [France](#). Film cameramen even found their way to France with the [British Expeditionary Force](#) and recorded even more smiling, laughing columns as they trudged the country roads looking for the enemy. But as soon as the armies came into contact and the retreat from Mons began, military headquarters sent the cameras home, fearful they would inadvertently record information “of value to the enemy.” Determined to demonstrate their patriotism, filmmakers set about recreating the war in their studios to encourage the public to greater effort in their war work and to exploit their appetite for war news of kind. The Hepworth Studio’s narrative film *Unfit or The Strength of the Weak*, released in October 1914 was typical. Two brothers try to enlist but only one is accepted. However, the second brother becomes a war correspondent and bravely sacrifices himself for his country in France. But recreating the [Western Front](#) in leafy Surrey with a handful of over-age actors provided audiences with a very limited and sanitized impression what it might be like in France.

Gradually, the authorities realized that this was a “[total war](#)” and politicians began to understand that they needed the full cooperation of all citizens. Thus they needed to inform the general public about the manner in which the war was being fought; about its insatiable demands for ever-more men and material and what better way to inform the public than through film, a medium that reached millions and which was widely regarded as “the very picture of reality”? Positive images of war, then, would serve to encourage the war effort and raise [public morale](#), dented by the fact that the war had not yet been won and by the growing casualty lists. Film could help undermine the image of the enemy and persuade the neutral nations that the Allied cause was just. [Charles Masterman \(1873-1927\)](#), the Liberal politician in charge of Britain’s [propaganda effort](#) from Wellington House, was well aware that the cinema could be a vital weapon in the war of ideas but it was difficult to persuade the War Office and Admiralty to allow the camera to oversee their preparations and operations. Nevertheless, negotiations were started in early 1915.

An immediate compromise was the film *Britain Prepared* which highlighted the work of both the army and navy but which employed no sensitive footage. The film was finally premiered

in December 1915. The first part showed the raising and training of [Horatio Herbert Kitchener's \(1850-1916\)](#) new armies and the second, focused on life aboard the *Queen Elizabeth*, one of the navy's battleships. The film, running at over three hours, actually showed nothing that the Services would find troubling yet still managed to provide a convincing demonstration for the [neutral](#) nations of British strength and commitment.² Finally, in mid-1915, the British government with the agreement of the War Office and Admiralty, and under considerable pressure from press and public, appointed the first official war artists and allowed photographers to go to the front. With them went two army cinematographers, Lieutenants [Geoffrey Malins \(1886-1940\)](#) and [John Benjamin McDowell \(1877-1954\)](#). The footage they shot was released to the newsreels and thus, for the first time, cinema audiences were allowed to see what the war in France was really like, or rather what the movie camera could record of it. But when these "pictures from the Front" appeared on the screen they were certainly not what the public expected.

Filmmakers, as non-combatants, were positioned relatively safely behind the front line. With heavy, unwieldy cameras, rapid movement was impossible. Without the advantages of telephoto lenses or fast film, it was impossible to record the detail of war. Even in July 1918, for example, a filmed report like the *Topical Budget's Battle South of Arras* shows only a distant view of tiny figures moving towards a ridge before they are obscured in smoke.³ Film, then, was often disappointing to an audience weaned on graphic, detailed images of war created by the artist and popular illustrator. In April 1916, the *Guardian* complained that the footage that had so far been released "offered such little access to life at the front" it might as well have been taken in this country.⁴

The Official Films

This attitude changed, however, in August 1916 with the release of the War Office film [The Battle of the Somme](#). A straightforward account of the preparations and opening phase of the [Somme Offensive](#) in July, one of the war's bloodiest and most controversial battles. The film had tremendous effect on spectators and added a new dimension to the visual imagery of the war. While many of the scenes would have been familiar, columns of smiling troops moving up to the front, preparations behind the lines and so on, it included a short sequence of British troops going "over the top," taking casualties, but advancing on the German front line. This twenty-one second sequence had considerable impact on audiences for here was the "real war" at last. The footage of British soldiers climbing a parapet and then falling, apparently dead or dying, was shocking, but it is now known that the attack sequence was faked, filmed in Britain. The real footage of British troops going into action was filmed from such a distance as to be almost meaningless. The film equally distorts truth in other ways.

Scenes of German [prisoners of war](#) trudging back under guard or of the German dead appear to suggest that the opening phase had been successful, indeed captions about “objectives taken” reinforce this suggestion. In reality of course, 1 July 1916 was the most disastrous day in the history of the British Army. Yet while the film evades the truth in some ways, the camera cannot disguise all the truths of battle. *The Battle of the Somme* also includes unprecedented footage of the pain and trauma on the faces of the troops after the attack and a longer sequence that shows graphic images of the dead – a slow pan across a heap of bodies at the bottom of a crater and later the unceremonious mass burials of the enemy dead. As *The Cinema* put it, “This is war, rich with death.”⁵

The Somme broke all box office records: [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) wrote a dedication that was read aloud in many cinemas and audiences across the country were shocked and horrified at the conditions at the front which were far more horrible than they could ever have imagined. Nothing could disguise the suffering of the men.⁶ It also introduced audiences to a new factor – that [modern industrialized warfare](#) destroyed not only men but the [environment](#) as well. It is impossible to view *The Somme* without becoming aware of what the war had done to the gentle landscape of northern France – a theme that would be developed by many of the war artists, most notably [Paul Nash \(1889-1946\)](#) especially in his aptly titled canvas “We Are Making a New World.”

Cooperation between the government and the film industry was now possible and the War Office Cinematograph Committee was formed in 1916. Chaired by the press baron [Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook \(1879-1964\)](#), the Committee became responsible for all film propaganda. The films produced varied from animations by [Lancelot Speed \(1860-1931\)](#) like *The U-Tube* (1917) which made fun of German ambitions, to documentaries of work on the home front such as *A Day in the Life of a Munitions Worker* (1917) which focused on the contribution of the women who worked at Woolwich Arsenal. *The Somme* was followed by other major films in the same style: *The King Visits his Armies in the Great Advance* released later in 1916 and *The Battle of Ancre* in early 1917. These images of the real war had a depressing effect; perhaps they were just too real after such a long diet of sanitized images? Nor could audiences identify with the documentary format in the same way as narrative film – they preferred to be drawn into the story, to become part of the drama in a way that was impossible with actuality footage.

It was Beaverbrook who in 1917, perceiving that weariness and low public morale was having a serious affect on the war effort, took the unprecedented step of inviting the celebrated American filmmaker [David Llewelyn Wark Griffith \(1875-1948\)](#), to make a narrative film about the war to increase anti-German sentiment and provide the incentive to “carry on” to victory.

The Cinematograph Committee even partly financed the film. *Hearts of the World – the Story of a Village* is set in a village in eastern France. It begins before the war; the villagers are happy and content and they even put up with an unpleasant German tourist, Von Strohm, who displays a curious interest in the strategic position of the village. In August 1914, with the men away at war, the village is occupied by the enemy. Von Strohm now reappears in his true colors as a Prussian officer. The villagers suffer under the [occupation](#), brutality and [rape](#) become commonplace. However, the villagers are eventually saved by an advance guard of French and American troops who drive out the Germans – a typically simple Griffiths’ scenario but one which had enormous appeal for audiences. To establish the authenticity of the film, it opens with scenes of Griffiths in France looking for locations and later meeting Lloyd George. Curiously, it predicts the end of the war for its final scenes are of the soldiers returning home. Griffiths did film in France and were given unprecedented access to the frontline. But while some of the footage was used, it was supplemented with material created on a Hollywood sound stage while the battle sequences were recreated on Salisbury Plain using British and Canadian troops. It was those scenes which provided the necessary “realism” to convince audiences that finally they were looking at the real war. [Karl Brown \(1896-1990\)](#), Griffiths’ cameraman, has recorded just how complex an operation it was to put together scenes, or parts of scenes, filmed in these different locations.

The film was continually switching from Hollywood to France to England and back to Hollywood, all within seconds of running time. A gun was fired in France and its shell shattered a wall on a [Hollywood] lot... three feet here, a foot there, ten frames somewhere else, and it’s done... [7](#)

Trickery, sleight of hand, indeed, yet what appeared on the screen conformed exactly to how audiences thought the war should look. Griffiths put into *Hearts of the World* the narrative drama that audiences felt the official films lacked – the “up close and personal” element that cameramen at the front were incapable of capturing and which spectators conditioned by fictional representations of war had come to expect. Released just before the Armistice, *Hearts of the World* stunned audiences in America and Britain into silence. But its propagandist function was never tested – would it have encouraged a flagging, war weary audience? We shall never know.

After the War

It has often been suggested that with the Armistice, the war disappeared from the screen. While it is true that fewer films were made, the impact of the war on British society was so great it became a constant presence in all the arts and not least in cinema. Between 1919 and 1939 more than thirty major feature films were made by British studios about the war.

Hollywood produced three times that number. If we add European and American productions to the list, it becomes clear that the war was a major theme in cinemas throughout the interwar period. There were also films that referenced the war in tangential ways – films about war widows, disillusioned or damaged veterans and so on.

It has equally become commonplace to argue that after the mid-1920s, British society turned against the war recognizing it as a futile struggle that achieved nothing but the death of a generation.⁸ The problem with this explanation, however, is that it is based upon limited sources, particularly the literature produced by a small elite of disillusioned and bitter survivors who felt betrayed because the war had neither restored that imaginary Edwardian golden summer nor the brave new world of the politicians' promises. Yet these views have been taken as representative of the nation as a whole. However, a viewing of the films made at that time reveals a different picture. Throughout the period war films reflected a positive, almost heroic interpretation of the war. They did not deny the appalling conditions, the suffering and the casualties but the British Empire had been victorious. Prussian militarism had been defeated, the freedom of Europe secured. Typical of this interpretation were British Instructional Film's reconstructions of famous battles. Beginning with *The Battle of Jutland* in 1921, these included *Armageddon* (1923), *Ypres* (1925) and *Mons* (1926). *Armageddon*, made with the cooperation of the British Army, told the story of the Palestine Campaign which defeated the Turks and provided the first real British success of the war. Made with the assistance of the government, these films were, as Samuel Hynes has suggested, concerned with telling the story of the war in "heroic, value-affirming terms...a testament to courage, patriotism and the nobility of sacrifice."⁹ Here the war was a justified crusade against tyranny in which those who fell found immortality in the memory of the nation. While producer [Harry Bruce Woolfe \(1880-1965\)](#) was concerned that all the military units which took part in the action should be acknowledged, his main objective was to show the war as another heroic episode in the history of Britain. As the Commemorative Programme for the film *Mons* explained,

Mons is the film-story of that Immortal Retreat, more splendid than any victory. Few alas, survive of those who actually fought through it, but they were our brothers and our sons, and their deeds must hold us still.¹⁰

Extremely popular with British audiences, these films acted as a form of [commemoration](#) – a tribute to a justified sacrifice that complimented the official view of the war expressed through memorials and remembrance ceremonies. It is easy to understand why the public wanted to remember the war in such terms. After all, it was a far more comforting idea for the hundreds of thousands of bereaved families than accepting that their loved ones died for

no good reason. One simply had to believe the war had been justified in order to give their deaths meaning.

British feature films, from [Maurice Elvey's \(1887-1967\) *Comradeship*](#) in 1919 to [Walter Forde's \(1896-1984\) *Forever England*](#) (1935), while not minimizing the soldiers' suffering, presented that image of a justified war in which stoic British "Tommies" did their duty. By the later 1930s, even adventure was back in fashion with films like *I was a Spy* (1933). As the anti-war movement gained momentum in the later 1920s, however, some filmmakers attempted to play both sides. [Adrian Brunel \(1892-1958\)](#), director of the highly successful *Blighty* (1927), candidly explained his position,

It fulfilled the requirements of a popular patriotic film, in that it showed a decent English family behaving decently... . They refused to join in the singing of either 'Land of Hope and Glory' or 'The Hymn of Hate'... . It also fulfilled the requirements of a 'war' picture, although we never showed the war....And it was quietly, an anti-war picture rather than a pro-war picture. ¹¹

After 1930, British war films were beginning to fall out of step with their European and American counterparts which were unambiguously condemnatory of the war at this point. The key film in this context was perhaps [Lewis Milestone's \(1895-1980\) *All Quiet on the Western Front*](#), released in 1930, and is still one of the most powerful anti-war films ever made. This American produced version of a [novel](#) by the German veteran [Erich Maria Remarque \(1898-1970\)](#) had an international appeal which spoke to many who had lived through the war. Its powerful narrative which tells of the fate of its young protagonists, brilliant direction and exceptional cinematography made it the benchmark for other productions. *All Quiet* and its European made counterparts like *Westfront 1918* (Germany 1930) or *Wooden Crosses* (France 1931) established an uncompromisingly negative interpretation of the war.

The two British films which are often assumed to be anti-war are *Journey's End* 1930, directed by [James Whale \(1889-1957\)](#), based on [Robert Cedric Sherriff's \(1896-1975\)](#) acclaimed stage play, and the 1931 screen version of [Ernest Raymond's \(1888-1974\)](#) best-selling novel *Tell England* directed by [Anthony Asquith \(1902-1968\)](#). Both Sherriff and Raymond had served in the war, the former as an infantry officer and the latter as a chaplain at Gallipoli. Both films are actually studies in duty, sacrifice and heroism; specifically that extraordinary sense of duty and understated everyday heroism found among those ex-public school junior officers that formed the backbone of the newly raised [Kitchener battalions](#).¹² In both of these films the war is brutal, cruel, deeply unpleasant, but the young protagonists must carry on, must do their duty for a justified cause even if it requires the ultimate sacrifice.

The only film that came close to an anti-war position was [Norman Lee's \(1898-1964\)](#) documentary *Forgotten Men* (1934) which highlighted the plight of disabled veterans, the "forgotten men" of the title. By focusing on the way these men had been treated it forces the viewer to consider whether the war was worthwhile. Nevertheless, it seems curious that as anti-war sentiment increased through the interwar years, the film industry, which relied on popular consensus for its success, did not reflect such views more strongly. Historian Jeffrey Richards has suggested that [censorship](#) may have had something to do with it: "The subject of pacifism and anti-war feeling came within the realm of the British Board of Censors ban on controversial politics' and so no film on the subject was permitted." Richards has identified a number of projects from the industry which were turned down as too controversial.¹³ Yet censorship in France was equally sensitive to the national interest but did not prevent films like *The Doomed Battalion* or *Wooden Crosses* from being produced. It seems most likely, then, that the majority of the British people wanted to remember the war as a cruelly fought but justified conflict for which the sacrifice had been worthwhile. This view, however, was to change with the Second World War.

Post-1945 Films

The Great War was rarely mentioned between 1939 and 1945 although there were passing references to it in a few wartime films like *The Dawn Guard* (1940) and *The Gentle Sex* (1943). These were always in reference to its futility or the betrayal of those who survived by post-war governments. The war against [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) was often regarded as a moral crusade and, after 1945, as more was revealed of the Nazi plan for Europe this belief was further strengthened. Against this, the Great War appeared even more futile and the few films that have been made since 1945 have all reflected this negative view. It was only as the nation approached the war's fiftieth anniversary in 1964 that interest was renewed. The period saw a number of controversial studies published and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produced its monumental series the *Great War* (1964). One might have expected that filmmakers would be tempted to exploit this renewed interest in the war but only four films were made between 1960 and 1976: [David Lean's \(1908-1991\)](#) epic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *King and Country* directed by [Joseph Losey \(1909-1984\)](#) in 1964, while in 1969 [Richard Attenborough \(1923-2014\)](#) released his version of the stage show *Oh! What a Lovely War*. In the mid 1970s came *Aces High* (1976), yet another version of *Journey's End* but this time set in a Royal Flying Corps squadron in France.

In their own way, each of these films interpreted the war as a bloody and brutal experience which dehumanized its victims. Even *Lawrence*, which could so easily have been a paean to heroism, demonstrated that war can not only bring out the best in its participants, it can also bring out the worst. The single exception was the 1971 adventure story *Zeppelin*, a sort of

Boys' Own romp which included double agents, beautiful spies and fanatical German officers. At the end of the 20th century, several other films were made including the critically-acclaimed *Regeneration* (1997), a fictionalized version of the meeting between [Siegfried Sassoon \(1886-1967\)](#) and [Wilfred Owen \(1893-1918\)](#) at Craiglockart Hospital in 1917; and the peculiar *Deathwatch* (2002), a horror film in which a group of infantrymen are destroyed by an "evil presence" in the trenches.

Conclusion

Despite renewed public interest in the Great War at the end of twentieth century, surprisingly few films about the war were produced. This would seem to be due mainly to the heavy costs of such productions and a diminishing cinema audience. However, it may also be due to the fact that since the 1970s television has become a significant provider of documentary and drama films about the war. Beginning with the documentary *The Great War* (BBC 1964) and prestigious adaptations like *Testament of Youth* (BBC 1979), television's contribution has included popular dramas like *All the King's Men* (BBC 1999) and *Birdsong* (BBC 2012). What is perhaps most evident in all these productions, whether made for cinema or television, is that on the screen the war is always a futile struggle in which a generation of patriotic young men commanded by dull-witted and unsympathetic senior officers endure a harsh and bloody experience. It would seem that as we now approach the centenary of the outbreak of the war, this interpretation, which has its origins in the bitter memoirs and poetry of the young survivors of the trenches, has become the accepted wisdom in popular culture.

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Filmography

A Day in the Life of a Munitions Worker (Great Britain, 1917)

Aces High (Great Britain, 1976, Jack Gold)

All Quiet on the Western Front (USA, 1930, Lewis Milestone)

Armageddon (Great Britain, 1923, Harry Bruce Woolfe)

Battle of Ancre (Great Britain, 1917, Geoffrey Malins)

Battle of the Somme (Great Britain, 1916, Geoffrey Malins)

Blighty (Great Britain, 1927, Adrian Brunel)

Britain Prepared (Great Britain, 1915)

Comradeship (Great Britain, 1919, Maurice Elvey)

Dawn Guard (Great Britain, 1940, Roy and John Boulting)

Deathwatch (Great Britain, 2002, Michael Bassett)

Forever England (Great Britain, 1935, Walter Forde)

Forgotten Men (Great Britain, 1934, Norman Lee)

Gentle Sex (Great Britain, 1943, Leslie Howard)

Hearts of the World (Great Britain/USA, 1918, David Wark Griffiths)

Journey's End (Great Britain/USA, 1930, James Whale)

Jutland (Great Britain, 1921, Harry Bruce Woolfe)

King and Country (Great Britain, 1964, Joseph Losey)

Lawrence of Arabia (Great Britain, 1962, David Lean)

Mons (Great Britain, 1926, Harry Bruce Woolfe)

Oh! What a Lovely War (Great Britain, 1969, Richard Attenborough)

Regeneration (Great Britain, 1997, Gilles Mackinnon)

Tell England (Great Britain, 1931, Anthony Asquith)

The Doomed Battalion (France, 1931, Cyril Gardner and Karl Hartl)

The King Visits His Armies in the Great Advance (Great Britain, 1916, Geoffrey Malins)

The U Tube (Great Britain, 1917, Lancelot Speed)

Unfit (Great Britain, 1914, Cecil Hepworth)

Westfront 1918 ["Western Front 1918"] (Germany, 1930, Georg Wilhelm Pabst)

Wooden Crosses (France, 1931, Raymond Bernard)

Ypres (Great Britain, 1925, Harry Bruce Woolfe)

Zeppelin (Great Britain, 1971, Etienne Perrier)

Television Films or Series

All the King's Men (Great Britain, 1999, Julian Jarrold)

Birdsong (Great Britain, 2012, Susanna White)

Testament of Youth (Great Britain, 1979, Moira Armstrong)

The Great War (Great Britain, 1964)

Notes

1. Kine Weekly, 27 August 1914, p. 63; Bioscope, 3 September 1914, p. 859. [↑](#)
2. See the comments by Reeves, Nicholas: Official British Film Propaganda. In Paris, Michael: The First World War and Popular Cinema. Edinburgh 1999, pp. 28-29; Wilson, Trevor: The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War, London 2010, pp. 737-738. [↑](#)
3. Topical Budget was perhaps the best of the British newsreels. The British Film Institute released a video compilation in 1992 which included several war reports, The Topical Budget, 1911-1931. [↑](#)
4. Manchester Guardian, 19 April 1916, p. 3. [↑](#)
5. The Cinema, Vol. XI: No. 200, 10 August 1916, p. 26. [↑](#)
6. On The Somme see Reeves, Nicholas: Cinema, Spectatorship and Propaganda: "The Battle of the Somme" (1916) and its Contemporary Audience, in: Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 17/1 (1997), pp. 5-28. [↑](#)
7. Brown, Karl: Adventures with D.W. Griffiths. London 1988, p. 195. [↑](#)
8. This argument underpins Kelly's book. See Kelly, Andrew: Cinema and the Great War. London 1997. [↑](#)
9. Hynes, Samuel: A War Imagined: The First World War and British Culture, London 1992, pp. 445-446. [↑](#)
10. Mons Commemorative Programme, New Era Films, 1923. [↑](#)
11. Brunel, Adrian: Nice Work: the Story of Thirty Years in British Film Production, London 1949, pp. 126-127. [↑](#)
12. The junior officer, the subaltern, as hero, seems to be a peculiarly British phenomenon. Numerous examples can be found in adventure fiction published during the war and

after. See Paris, Michael: Over the Top: the Great War and Juvenile Literature in Britain, Westport 2004. ↑

13. Richards, Jeffrey: The British Board of Film Censors and Content Control in the 1930s: Foreign Affairs, in: Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 2/1 (1982), p. 45. ↑

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External Links

- [Armageddon, 1918 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Britain Prepared, 29 December 1915 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Griffith, D.W.: Hearts of the world, USA 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Mons, 1926 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Movie trailer, All Quiet on the Western Front, 1930 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Pictorial News, Official, 8 April 1918 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
- [The Battle of Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks, 1917 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
- [The German Retreat and the Battle of Arras, 6 June 1916 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Topical Budget, 1914 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)

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

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