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Daniel Reynaud

Avondale College, daniel.reynaud@avondale.edu.au

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Film and National Mythology: The Anzac Legend in Australian Films

Daniel Reynaud

The Anzac legend is central to the Australian mythic national identity, drawing on elements of earlier key myths popularised by writers such as Henry Lawson, Banjo Patterson, Marcus Clarke and Steele Rudd. In particular, the Anzac myth has drawn on the underdog myths which idealised convicts, bushrangers (outlaws), gold diggers, larrikins (mischievous jokers or louts), and the bush “battlers”—small farmers struggling to survive against the harsh elements of the Outback and the landowning Squatter class. The racial theories of White Australia (the almost universal belief for much of the 1900s of reserving Australia for the superior Anglo-Saxon race) have also contributed to Anzac’s white, male bias. The Anzac legend pervades much of Australian culture, from the various temple-like memorials to literature, art, music and film.

The legend has undergone significant changes since its foundation in the early years of World War I, although some elements have remained strikingly the same. While these changes can be observed for example through a study of written literature (Gerster 1987; Gerster and Pierce 2004), the cinema is a particularly useful way to trace the ways in which the legend has evolved. Because they are expensive to make, movie profits rely on very large audiences, which better represent the masses of public opinion, while cheaper books or pamphlets may be profitable while reaching relatively few. By focussing on key movies made at seminal points in the

legend's development, we can observe both the changes and the continuity of the myth of Anzac.

The historical foundation of the Anzac legend was the landings of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) on the beaches of Gallipoli in Turkey on 25 April 1915. Until that time, Australia lacked a military mythology of its own, and its earliest war films were derivative of British films, with their emphasis on manly British valour and the cult of the bayonet. However, the landings inspired an outpouring of national pride, and within three months two movies about Gallipoli had been released to popular and critical acclaim.

The first of these was *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, released in July 1915. It was made by the nation's largest film company, Australasian, and by one of the Australian silent screen era's most competent directors, Alfred Rolfe. It was an attempt to visualise the sensational newspaper report of the Anzac landings by British journalist Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, which had electrified the Australian public. It borrowed its lead character from an earlier popular short recruiting film, *Will They Never Come?*, released in April 1915. The federal government, impressed by the short film, suggested the sequel and lent its authority to the new production. It is no surprise then, that the film followed official policy in its unabashed support for the war.

It was also an overwhelming popular success. The public was hungry for anything that allowed it to participate in the success of its troops on the other side of the world. The film included long sections of actuality footage of soldiers training at Sydney's Liverpool Camp and in camps in Egypt, and generated reviews which stressed its truthfulness and realism.

The Hero of the Dardanelles fashions its ideal Anzac around Will Brown, played by Guy Hastings, a well-to-do athlete who enlists, is trained, and then sent to Egypt. From here he takes part in the landings on 25 April, killing a Turk barehanded. With a badly injured leg, he is hospitalised and repatriated, to marry his sweetheart.

This first cinematic representation of the Anzac pictured him as a city boy from a wealthy family. There was no hint of the egalitarian bush myth which later came to monopolise the legend. Nor was there much suggestion of a distinctive Australian identity. As with earlier films, the language and imagery is more English than Australian. The English term "pals" is used rather than the Australian "mates" when Will encourages his friends to enlist. He displays a recruiting poster of Lord Roberts, complete with Union Jack flags. The soldiers are portrayed wearing the English-style peaked caps

rather than the distinctive Australian slouch hats.

This Imperial bias is consistent with the times. Many Australians considered themselves to be Britons living in Australia. Australian Great War imagery is filled with appeals to the Empire, and the Union Jack is more frequent than the Australian flag. The similarity of *The Hero of the Dardanelles* to contemporary English war films is unsurprising. Without an established military tradition of its own, Australia naturally borrowed the imagery of Britain. Imperial military spectacle was a popular genre on stage and screen in Australia in the years leading up to the war, and created standards which early Australian productions imitated. The aristocratic Will Brown, clearly officer material, is similar to the characters found in two British war films released at about the same time in Australia. One emphasises "British pluck" in the face of hardships "that would break a weakling," while the other tells the story of a man whose natural class led him to rise "from the ranks to the Officer's Mess." The emphasis on class distinction and manliness characterised both British and early Australian war films.

The Turkish enemy, at that stage an unknown entity, was constructed to conform to the familiar image of the villainous German, as atrocity-committing soldiers, helped by propaganda associations of "the Hun" with Asiatics. The widely accepted White Australia policy was a powerful ideological appeal often used in justifying the war. By defeating the enemy, German or Turk, Australians could ensure the survival of white Anglo culture in Australia. The Turk that Will confronts is sniping at the Red Cross, firmly putting the new enemy in the same evil ideological category as the rapacious Hun in Belgium. By contrast, the nobility of the Australian Britons is demonstrated in their bayonet charge. British military myth had established a cult of the bayonet, representing hand-to-hand, man-to-man fighting, while the Turk was portrayed as fighting from a distance with shell and machine gun. Will's barehanded attack on his Turkish opponent furthered the myth of personal valour and manliness in the British culture. Manliness was a key theme of the film, as the star athlete became the willing soldier, gained the love of his girl, proved himself to be a man, and won a man's rewards: a wife and a farm.

The immense popularity of this film, and of *Within Our Gates* (1920), another Gallipoli movie released just two days later, spurred the production of a number of other patriotic war dramas. One modestly successful film was *Murphy of Anzac* (1916), a drama about Australia's "home-grown" Anzac

hero Jack Simpson, who borrowed a donkey from Indian troops at Gallipoli to transport wounded soldiers to the beach. The film again used English imagery to represent this Australian hero—perhaps appropriately, given that Simpson was in fact an Englishman who happened to be in Australia when the war began. This film, along with the box-office hit *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* (1916), about the English nurse who was executed by the Germans for helping British escapees, and several other films about British or French heroes showed that the Australian identity was still closely tied to the British Empire.

But by mid-1916, the popularity of war movies dramatically waned. Australian audiences, faced with the endless casualty lists from static battles, were no longer interested in propaganda movies, and soon after tired even of documentary films from the front. While several movies were made, usually with strong government support, they generally failed miserably at the box office. The Federal government of Prime Minister Billy Hughes tried desperately to raise interest in the war through alarmist propaganda and rigorous censorship, but the vitriolic campaign only served to divide Australian society, and make Anzac themes unpopular.

Between the wars, the Anzac legend went through hard times, as competing interest groups tried to shape it. Many ex-soldiers favoured the radical, working-class, anti-establishment, anti-Empire larrikin digger, while officialdom pushed a sanitised, imperial, patriotic legend which had borrowed much of its imagery from Australian bush myths, evident especially in the writings of C. E. W. Bean, the war correspondent and Official War Historian (Garton 45-6; 53-5). There was also widespread public indifference to Anzac experiences from a nation tired of war talk.

While Anzac writings found niche audiences, films struggled to appeal across the spectrum in order to be profitable. Successful Australian films between the wars introduced two new elements to the on-screen Anzac: humour, and an Australian character clearly distinguishable from the British. Humour made the tragedy of the war tolerable to audiences, while the introduction of Australian types was a notable development from the wartime films. Two actors in particular epitomised the Australian soldier. The first was Arthur Tauchert, who had made his reputation as *The Sentimental Bloke*, a stocky urban larrikin in a film based on popular poet C. J. Dennis's nationalistic verse. He starred in three war dramas, *Ginger Mick* (1920), *The Digger Earl* (1924), and *Fellers* (1930). Tauchert was then replaced by Pat Hanna's long, lean comic bushman figure in *Diggers* (1931)

and *Diggers in Blighty* (1933), the prototype for all succeeding Anzac screen heroes. Ironically, Guy Hastings, the Anzac hero of *The Hero of the Dardanelles* in 1915, played the pompous English Sergeant-Major in *Diggers*, showing how much the archetypal Anzac image had shifted from the proper upper class Britisher to the casual lower class Australian. Despite the change, Empire loyalty was still evident: the English were represented with respect, and both English and Australians stereotypes were objects of affectionate humour.

Perhaps it was because Hanna was a New Zealander that his two films included characters who were outside the stereotypical White Australian. Minor roles go to Scotsmen and an American, while passing shots show the distinctive headgear of New Zealanders and Sikhs. Most notably, a token Aboriginal soldier, "Jacky," is shown in one shot, which is doubly striking: few Aboriginals were permitted to serve in either of the world wars, due to the entrenched beliefs in White Australia; and no film before or since has included Aboriginal soldiers. Hanna's "Jacky" allowed a couple of jokes on racial issues, while providing a novelty feature for non-Australian audiences.

The classic film which illustrates the changes and continuity of war films of this era was *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940). It was the work of perhaps the key Australian director of the early sound period, Charles Chauvel. In a cinema dominated by American movies, he was committed to presenting Australian themes in his films. Furthermore he had a personal interest in the Australian Light Horse. His father and brother had served in the Light Horse, and his uncle, Sir Harry Chauvel, was its famous commander in Palestine.

Influences on the film were various. While Chauvel's personal experiences with Light Horsemen was with the more patrician officers, the script he wrote valorised the egalitarian Anzac legend, with only brief glimpses of the officers at work. However, the latter were portrayed according to Chauvel's experience, unlike the approachable, egalitarian officers of the Anzac legend of modern times.

Chauvel was forced to try to please not only the general public but also officialdom. The New South Wales Government tied funding to a demand to remove any reference to bad behaviour on the part of Australian soldiers (Archives Office of New South Wales, Theatres and Films Commission Minute Books, 6/5607-13). With renewed propaganda needs for a country again at war, the government wished to ensure the film's support for its

attempts at recruiting. Nevertheless, the film retained hints of larrikin behaviour, though again rendered relatively innocuous.

With Turkey being a neutral power in the World War II, the film transferred its negative rhetoric to the Germans, to avoid offending a potential ally. The Turks were labelled the “Germanised Army,” and their honourable behaviour and respect for the Australians contrasted with the dastardly Germans, whose caricatured villainy was a throwback to the excesses of Great War propaganda.

The other great shaping factor in *Forty Thousand Horsemen* was the casting of the long and lean Chips Rafferty in the supporting role of Jim, the “laconic outback horseman with a wry sense of humour” (Larkins 12). He improvised his character with instinctive skill to personify the mythic Anzac. He not only stole the limelight from the film’s main character, he also went on to become the archetypal Australian in local and international film productions for thirty years. Rafferty’s Jim built on the lanky comic-bushman Anzac image established by Pat Hanna in stage and screen productions, further consolidating the move away from Hastings and Tauchert’s stocky city men.

The British-Australian connection, while not openly challenged, was more ambiguous than the imperial patriotism of *The Hero of the Dardanelles* and other films from the Great War. While the Australian soldiers wished to be included in the great book of impressive British military achievements, there were also suggestions that the British were quick to retreat. At the film’s climax, General Chauvel pointedly overlooked the offer of British Yeomanry in favour of the Light Horse for the final attack on Beersheba. Otherwise the British were notable largely for their absence. The film showed clearly the shift in the legend from the Great War’s imperial outlook to the more distinctively Australian tone that developed during the interwar years. Another notable change was the more sombre tone of the film. The simplistic enthusiasm of early Great War cinema was moderated by an awareness of the tedious and grim nature of war, with the two support characters killed partway through the film.

Forty Thousand Horsemen was a hugely successful film in Australia, helped by massive publicity, strong Government support, and the failed attempts by Cresswell O’Reilly, the puritanical official censor, to delete scenes showing the hero and heroine spending an unchaperoned night together. Advertising was able to play on this event by offering “the complete film [. . .] no censor cuts [sic]” (“The Anzacs Ride Again” 1940),

which piqued public interest. The film quickly set new box office records, and proved popular with servicemen flocking to the cinemas to see the exploits of their fathers ("Light Horse Film: Audiences Applaud 'Cut' Scene" 1940). Critical reaction in Australia was very positive, with emphasis on its technical quality, comparable to the best foreign productions, and its "truly Australian" spirit and "shatteringly real conclusion" ("Holiday Time in the Film Theatres" 1940). The film seemed perfectly attuned to the needs of Australian audiences at the time, giving a stirring and inspirational account that was at the same time not completely naïve about the grim nature of war. The film was screened in Britain and Asia, where it met with critical and commercial success, and also made a good profit in America, although the critics there were a little sharper, noting weaknesses in the storyline, acting and direction, while still praising "those roistering warriors" who were now fighting Rommel in the desert ("The New York Times Film Reviews" 1941).

The film reinforced the bush myth and the exclusively male and Anglo nature of Anzac. Red Gallagher, the protagonist, fell in love with an enterprising young French girl in Palestine who twice rescued him in the desert, but he could still opine that she would be useless in the Australian outback on a sheep muster. Turkish, Arab, French and British observers could admire the Australians, but none could match them. In fact, other ethnicities were used in contrast with the virtues of the Australians: whites such as the French or British could perhaps get close, but Arabs were as much figures of fun as serious characters. The final image of the film was not of the reunited lovers, but of the Light Horse singing as they rode, united in male mateship. This aspect gained the attention of contemporary critics, despite Betty Bryant's role as the love interest. One Australian reviewer described it as "the most purely masculine film I have seen, with very few exceptions—and therein, I think, lies its strength" (Chiel 2). The Anzac legend was maintaining its role of helping to define Australian manhood, a key feature of *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, and also of its successor as the touchstone of the legend on film, *Gallipoli* (1981).

After World War II there was a long hiatus in representing Anzacs on screen. Australian soldiers did not have such a prominent role in the latest global conflict, and war images were dominated by British and American films. Contributing to this was the old-fashioned Imperial outlook of long-serving Prime Minister Robert Menzies, and the virtual collapse of the Australian film industry. The legend itself was forced to change to

accommodate the unpopular Vietnam War which had clouded Australian military valour, now touting that war and its supporting political and military institutions were bad, but that the individual Australian soldier was noble and heroic. Furthermore, despite Menzies' best efforts, the intervening years had distanced Australians from their attachment to Britain. The British had taken little interest in defending Australia during the Pacific war, while the post-war influx of European migrants diluted the pool of Anglo loyalists. The passing of Menzies from the political scene just as the restless baby boomer generation came of age spelt the end of the British orientation and a vigorous search for an exclusively Australian identity. The revived and revised Anzac legend served the nation's needs admirably, and its new form tended to portray the British hierarchy as the enemy, while the Turks and Germans became the decent and worthy opponents of the Anzacs, who by now were deeply entrenched in the popular imagination as the archetypical bushmen.

The most influential representation of the new Anzac legend was undoubtedly Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981), which one historian considered to have "probably reached more people than any other evocation of Anzac" (Inglis 12). It reintroduced a whole generation of Australians to the Anzac legend on screen and became the benchmark for all cinematic representations of the Great War to follow. While it formed part of the wave of nationalistic period films of the 1980s, including at least eleven film and television productions about Anzac (an intensity only surpassed by the number of films from the Great War era itself), its impact was such that it received much more press coverage than any other Australian war production, and also attracted considerable academic attention. The film perfectly reflected its age, as some caustically commented, in

that the pulse of nationalist sentiment was at that moment fluttering so susceptibly that audiences could more than tolerate an account of the story completely lacking in irony. (Dermody and Jacka 163)

The plot centred around two competitive sprinters, one from the bush and the other from the city, who hear of the Gallipoli landings and volunteer for the Light Horse. After various predictable adventures in Cairo sightseeing, baiting the British and abusing the locals, they are sent to Gallipoli as reinforcements. During the attack on the Nek, the city man is unable to prevent a disastrous attack (inspired by more British military incompetence), and his innocent country friend dies in freeze-frame sprinting toward the Turkish machine guns.

Gallipoli updated the Anzac legend to reflect current opinions and concerns, indeed so successfully that one commentator remarked that it "is not so much about Australians in war as it is a celebration of the national ideology" (Freebury 7). It contained all the essential elements of the Anzac, and Australian, myth: the importance of sport, the anti-British sentiment, the metaphorical use of the Australian landscape, but most of all the bushmen archetypes, including the wowser (prudish teetotaler killjoy) and the larrikin, the emphasis on mateship, and the almost complete absence of women. The battlefield is populated only by white Australian soldiers and their "enemies," the British and the Turks; the presence of New Zealanders, Greeks, Indians, Jews and other nationalities at Gallipoli is completely ignored in the film, as it is in the legend. Egyptians in their own country are also treated condescendingly, as the butt of jokes, reminiscent of Chauvel's film. Again, the exclusive and masculine nature of the Anzac legend, even after its evolutions, is striking.

The movie appeared to set the tone for the rest of the decade. The popular television mini-series *Anzacs* (1985) gained high ratings with its drum-beating jingoism, even if its sentimental soap opera treatment was of a much lower artistic standard than Weir's. The series made a superficial attempt to broaden the Anglo Anzac stereotype by including some characters of European origin, but it was difficult to take the approach seriously. Prior to *Gallipoli*, Bruce Beresford's *Breaker Morant* (1980) played to similar themes of Australian ingenuity and mateship in the face of British incompetence and snobbery during the Boer War. *The Lighthorsemen* (1987) was an earnest attempt to capture both the spirit of Anzac and the historical reality of the Palestine campaign, falling somewhat short of either target.

However, several mini-series subtly undermined the classic Anzac myth. *1915* (1982) had all the complexity of characterisation that *Anzacs* lacked, while *A Fortunate Life* (1986) offered understated warmth and authenticity in bringing to the screen Albert Facey's artless autobiography. *The Alien Years* (1988) painfully brought to Australia's attention its shameful treatment of ethnic Germans in Australia during the Great War. Despite these gently revisionist representations, such was the power of the traditional Anzac legend that these productions were read by many viewers and even critics as further reinforcements of the myth of Australian superiority by championing mateship, bush skills, egalitarianism and a deep contempt for everything British.

Although the Anzac legend had been updated to address the concerns

of late Twentieth century audiences, *Gallipoli* and its ideological successors in many ways merely reinforced the myth's traditional values. Sylvia Lawson (1981) compared the similarity of silhouetted figures in front of the pyramids in *The Hero of the Dardanelles* and *Gallipoli*, noting that

[t]here are sixty-six years of history between these two intensely mythic shots; there is almost no ideological space between them at all. The first celebrates the Australian soldier; the second that mateship, which, Bean proposed, invigorated their soldiering. (11)

Lawson put her finger on what was the most common complaint by reviewers and historians: that the film simply showed the Anzac myth without any attempt to challenge it. While for many people the movie became the definitive interpretation of Gallipoli (one university tutor commented to the author that she could not get her students to read about the Gallipoli campaign, because they had seen the film), in fact, it tells us less about the actual event than it does about Australian attitudes in the 1980s to the event. The film is perhaps the outstanding example of the brash, confident, self-congratulatory nationalism of the era. The film's technical competence (and virtually all commentators agree that the film was accomplished and moving) marked the product of a nation that could take its place on the world stage; its simplistic homage to the Anzac myth suggested a nation of lingering immaturity with its need to denigrate the British, uphold everything archetypically Australian as being the ultimate, and exclude the rest of the world from its representations.

Australian war films graphically illustrate the path of the Anzac legend from its birth to the end of the century. Through them we can see it evolve from a derivative British story to one which is wholly Australian, having transformed the Anzac from an aristocratic city boy to the country larrikin, and having recast the Britisher in the role of villain. However, what has not changed over that time is the role of the Anzac in Australian mythology: virtually all productions cast the Anzac as the embodiment of the truly (male) Australian: Anglo-white, heroic, distinguishable from the "other" of different races and nationalities, and the paragon of the true virtues of mateship and fighting prowess.