
Constructing the Anzac Image:

A study of Australia's first three Gallipoli movies 1915-16

Daniel Reynaud
Avondale College

The celebration on film of the Gallipoli story is best known to modern eyes through the films of the 1980s. However, the first films to mythologise the event were released in July 1915 and April 1916. These representations so close to the event (and indeed the first two were made while the campaign was still in progress) offer a perspective on how it was constructed and imagined at the time, before it accumulated eighty years of mythic reworking. The films were also an active part of the prosecution of the war effort, as an intentional part of the recruiting campaign.

Given the limited visual media coverage of Gallipoli at the time, these cinematic representations played a significant part in shaping the popular conception of the campaign, and must be considered as among the most powerful shaping forces in the birth of the Anzac Legend.

The three early films emerged from complex motivation. Widespread social Darwinist racial theories prompted many Australians to seize upon the landings as evidence that the new nation had come of age by blooding itself on the international scene, and proving that its manhood was as valiant as that of Britain, or even of the great heroes of Greek legend who had fought in the same place centuries ago. Furthermore, popular interest in the event suggested good box-office returns for film producers. On top of these were more pragmatic reasons for building the event up to legendary status. Despite the impression of overwhelming enthusiasm for the war effort, as early as January 1915 officials were publicly expressing concern about the level of voluntary enlistments.¹ It was a problem that would grow steadily worse throughout the war, and film-makers offered patriotic dramas as a way of stimulating voluntary enlistments. Government pressure and the restrictions of censorship further encouraged film-makers to produce pro-war films.

The Hero of the Dardanelles

The publication of Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett's stirring hyperbolic report of the Gallipoli landings aroused a renewed burst of public patriotism. Australasian Films, the largest cinema conglomerate in the country, quickly recognised the cinematic potential of his report, and seized upon it as the basis for a feature film. The company had already made a very popular short recruiting drama, which was released with official sanction in April 1915. An impressed Federal Government suggested that a sequel be made, again offering the co-operation of Defence forces. Released a mere two months later, on 17 July 1915,

it was entitled *The Hero of the Dardanelles*,² and was directed by one of Australia's most capable and innovative early directors, Alfred Rolfe. It was an instant success, and stayed in the theatres for months.³ Later, it was successful in England as well.⁴

The story involved a well-to-do young athlete, Will, who enlisted, was trained, won the hand of his girl, Lily, then went to Egypt before taking part in the Anzac landings. There on the first day he fought hand to hand with a Red Cross-sniping Turk, tumbling down the cliff before drowning his adversary in the sea. Badly wounded from his fight, Will was repatriated, and upon recovery married Lily.

Several key elements of the portrayal attract the attention of modern viewers. The issue of manliness was harped upon in the film, a legacy still visible in the modern versions of the Gallipoli story (for example in the 1981 feature film *Gallipoli*). But while it offered an image of the 'real' Australian man, Will's character partook more of Britain than of the legendary digger of present-day Anzac myth. Again, like modern versions, it was couched in patriotic terms, but one coloured by a strong Imperial outlook. Will displayed a recruiting poster of Lord Roberts to his 'pals'—a very English term compared to the 'mateship' that the Anzac legend would develop. As the model Australian of 1915, Will was made to look like the Imperial ideal. He was from the upper levels of Australian society, and in the British martial tradition, raised on the aristocratic sports of tennis and cricket.

The idealised Australian soldier in 1915 was therefore a wealthy city boy who would make a fine officer, rather than the egalitarian bushman of the later Anzac myth. Will's image was similar to that of English films screened a week before the promotion for *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, which emphasised British manliness and class superiority.⁵ While the distinctive Digger image existed in embryonic form before the war, it had not yet been popularised, and the Australian public measured their troops against British standards.⁶

Racial concerns also showed up in the portrayal of the Turks. Having little background knowledge of the race, Australian producers found it easy to associate them with Asiatics, against whom Australians had a well-established history of discrimination. As the enemy, they were also linked with the atrocities which popular propaganda attributed to the Germans as they progressed across Belgium and France. Hence the Turk sniping at the Red Cross before being tackled barehanded and drowned by Will. In harmony with British military myth, the Australians were portrayed as fighting man-to-man with bayonets and hands, while the cowardly Turks hid behind machine guns and rifles.

The film was presented as a simple and truthful retelling of the story of Anzac. Scenes of Will's training were composed of documentary footage of the Liverpool Camp, and an advertisement for the film proclaimed: 'MOST GRAPHICALLY AND FAITHFULLY PORTRAYED IN ACCORDANCE WITH ASHMEAD BARTLETT'S HISTORIC DESPATCH'.⁷ Critics believed in its factuality, praising the battle scenes as 'historically correct', and so faithful 'that it is really difficult to believe that [it was] not the real thing'.⁸ Soldiers on Gallipoli got wind of the story, by now reported in the British press

as a true account, but they were not deceived, recognising the improbability of the story.⁹ Their scepticism is telling, for those who praised the 'realism' of the film had of course not witnessed the real event. Even Ashmead-Bartlett had observed the landings in the half-dark from a battleship some kilometres off the coast, which makes nonsense of the detailed heroics of his report. While the film was believed at the time to be truthful, its credibility stemmed more from the desire to believe the best about Australia's military performance and a desire to stimulate the war effort.

However misleading it may have been about the facts, it was also recognised as a fine piece of film making as well. The surviving sequences reveal that these judgements were better founded. The acting is natural and restrained, and the direction and photography is creative and effective, with good use of close-ups at a time when they were rare. Cinematic competence was also a matter of national pride, local efforts constantly being measured against European and American standards. In the opinion of one reviewer, *The Hero of the Dardanelles* demonstrated 'that Australian actors and actresses can ... perform for the "movies" in a manner equal to the much-boomed and big-salaried American picture people'.¹⁰ Thus the film captured not only popular attitudes towards the AIF at Gallipoli, but also did it in a way that made people proud of the quality of Australian cinema.

Within Our Gates

The second Gallipoli film was strikingly similar to the first, not only in its themes but also in the manner of production. The J. C. Williamson Company employed Frank Harvey to direct *Within Our Gates*, which was released two days after *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, on 19 July 1915. Like *The Hero*, it was filmed around the bays of Sydney, was made with co-operation from the army, and carried the written approval of Senator Pearce. Its themes also highlighted Empire patriotism, manliness, villainous enemies, romance, and realism, and it too was a notable critical and commercial success.

The plot was more complicated than *The Hero*, with a German spy, already the stock villain on stage, screen and press, blackmailing Max, a German-Australian. His step-daughter exposed him to save her love Edgar, son of the War Minister. Max and Edgar enlisted and Max redeemed himself when he died to save Edgar's life. The film's subtitle, *Deeds That Won Gallipoli*, tied the film to the popular pre-war book, *Deeds that Won the Empire*, linking Gallipoli with the other acts of Imperial glory. One advertisement spoke 'of the boys who are fighting the fight of their lives for the sake of Empire and home.... It appeals to the very hearts and souls of every true Britisher.'¹¹ Reviewers judged the film to be both extremely realistic and among the best Australian films ever made.¹² Only the *Bulletin* saw through the melodramatic plot, which it described in a tongue-in-cheek manner.¹³

Despite the first signs of organised opposition to the war effort, the enthusiastic reception granted these films by Government, critics and the paying public indicates the degree of unanimity of opinion at this early stage of the war. Portrayals of the war in heroic manly British Imperial terms were perceived as factual rather than fictional.

Murphy of Anzac

Such unity of purpose and vision was already breaking down. As divisions grew in Australia over the war, and as recruiting slumped to alarming lows in 1916, politicians and recruiters sought to promote the war by celebrating the first anniversary of the Anzac landings. Already the Gallipoli story, embroidered by journalists and politicians, had begun to achieve mythic dimensions. As state governments planned Anzac festivities, the third and final Great War Gallipoli film, *Murphy of Anzac*, was released on 24 April 1916, with perfect timing to exploit the commercial potential of Jack Simpson's growing legend.

Like the war films before it, and many after, it was advertised as a recruiting film,¹⁴ a simple and moving film, with 'stirring deeds of heroism' and 'prodigies of valor [sic] and devotion'. Realism was again claimed as a virtue, the film said to be a simple re-enactment of Gallipoli, with many of the cast being returned soldiers.¹⁵

But despite this promise, the melodramatic plot, weak photography and the poor acting moved one reviewer to condemn the film, despite his respect for Simpson. Furthermore, he pointed out that the role of the villain, a caricatured German spy, was 'ridiculous'.¹⁶ Criticism of anti-German propaganda in films had begun with reviews of John Gavin's melodramatic *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell*, released in January 1916. Its reappearance over *Murphy of Anzac* confirmed that an increasing number of Australians no longer believed the virulent propaganda campaign against Germans.

It is difficult to estimate its popularity. A paucity of reviews would suggest that it was not a great success, but on the other hand it seemed to have a reasonable run in metropolitan cinemas, and in June a reporter in Bathurst noted that it was a huge success, being booked for a further two nights.¹⁷ The response to *Murphy of Anzac* reflected the changing mood of wartime Australia. Letters from men at the front, and the appalling casualty lists for no apparent gain helped people distinguish between the strident propaganda and the reality of the war, as consensus over the war effort broke down. The naivety of 1915 had gone, and with it the unqualified commitment to the war. While most people believed that the war had to be won, they did not necessarily support the Government's increasingly heavy-handed approach.

Identifying and Restoring the Lost Films

Despite the success and significance of Australia's first Gallipoli movies, they have largely been lost to the ravages of time. The opening sequences—about twelve minutes—of *The Hero of the Dardanelles* survived largely intact in the National Film and Sound Archive. These cover Will's decision to join up, his appeal to his friends, his training, the proposal to his girl, his farewell and departure, and a few moments in Egypt. Fortunately, about two-and-a-half minutes of the Gallipoli landings in the 1928 film *The Spirit of Gallipoli*, preserved in the Archive were in fact borrowed from *The Hero of the Dardanelles*. A series of film stills published in the *Sunday Telegraph Pictorial* of 1940 go a long way to filling in the missing parts of the film, and with the help of the original scenario in the National Archives of Australia,¹⁸ allow us for the first time to complete

the story. The reconstruction has been completed by the National Film and Sound Archive with the help of the author, and now runs for about 20 minutes.



Images 1 and 2 are taken from a video copy of *The Spirit of Gallipoli*. The gentle cliff and the slouch hats in Image 1 distinguish it from stills of *Within Our Gates* (Images 4 and 5).

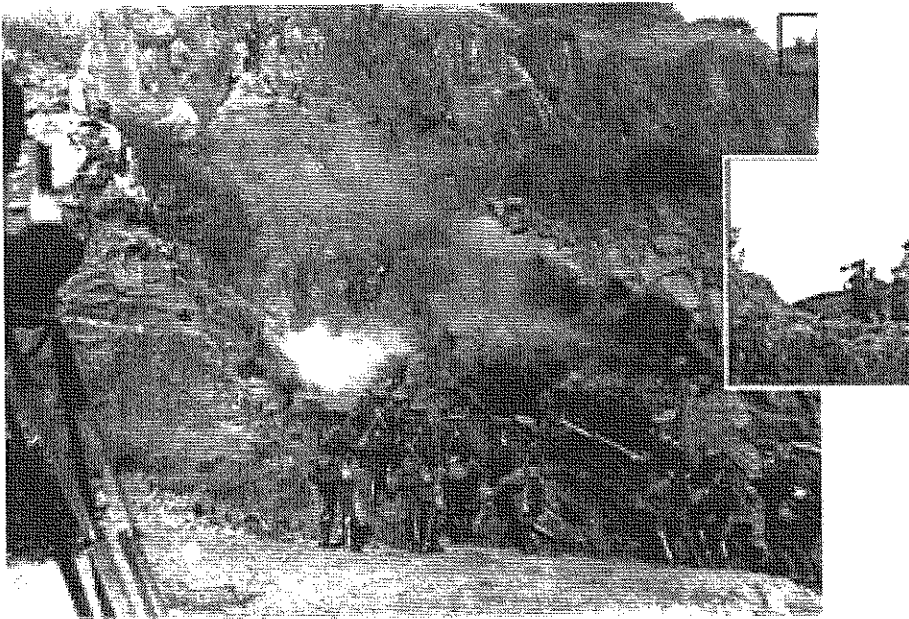


Inset in Image 2 is a still from *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, published in the *Sunday Telegraph Pictorial*, 14 January 1940, confirming that these scenes come from *The Hero*. Other stills in the *Sunday Telegraph Pictorial* match with images preserved in *The Hero* in the National Film and Sound Archive.

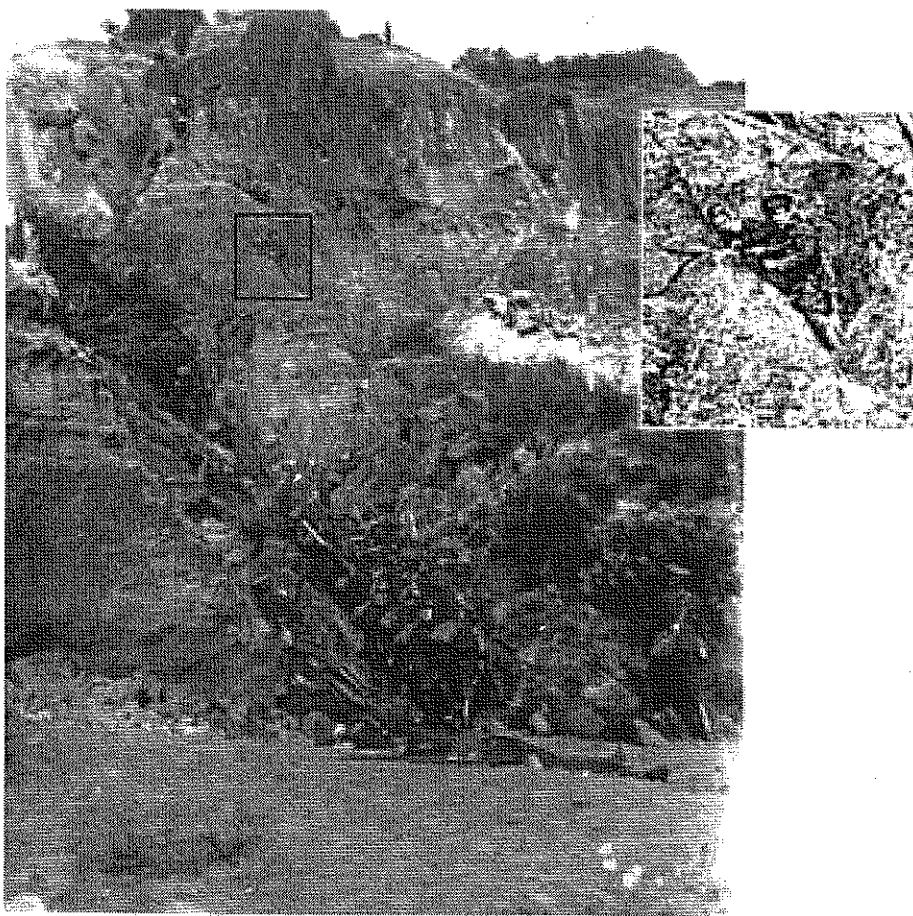
Within Our Gates survives visually only in stills and a fragment of film. The National Archives of Australia has preserved a series of stills from *Within Our Gates*, which were submitted along with the copyright registration application.¹⁹



Image 3 is one from the Archives, which was also published in *Lone Hand*, 1 October 1915, and the inset is a video frame from *Noad Film A. H.* While the rest of *Noad* is clearly from *The Hero*, this frame matches perfectly with Image 3, thus conclusively identifying it as being from *Within Our Gates*. Unfortunately, the shot is only about six seconds long. On the other hand, we could hardly have found a more significant part of the film, and we now have six seconds more than we had before!



Images 4 and 5 reveal a cliff much steeper than *The Hero's* gentle slope, and all the soldiers wear officer-style caps rather than *The Hero's* slouch hats—further proof that *The Spirit of Gallipoli* footage is from *The Hero*, not *With Our Gates*. Notice on the left of Image 4 the camera tripod and cinematographer Monte Luke's hand cranking the camera. Unlike today, when stills rarely match any footage in a film, in the days of silent film the stills photographer could stand close to the camera without the shutter click upsetting anyone. The similarity between stills and film images is evident in Images 2 and 3, and demonstrates that many stills preserved of lost films are a reliable guide to scenes from the film.



Another interesting detail in Image 4 is the inset, taken from the top right of the picture. It appears to be an adult and three children, most probably spectators, watching the novel event of movie making at a Sydney beach. The inset on Image 5 is of a Turk and Anzac standing amicably side-by-side halfway up the cliff, looking at the camera. The main action is below them, and they are waiting for their cue from the director to begin acting. Again, with silent films, the director could call out instructions while the camera was turning.



Image 6 is one of only two surviving pictures of *Murphy of Anzac*, and is fascinating. Compare the stiff English parade-ground poses of the men saluting the dead Simpson with the casual image of the later Anzac legend. It is enlightening to compare it with two photographs of actual soldiers taken in France.

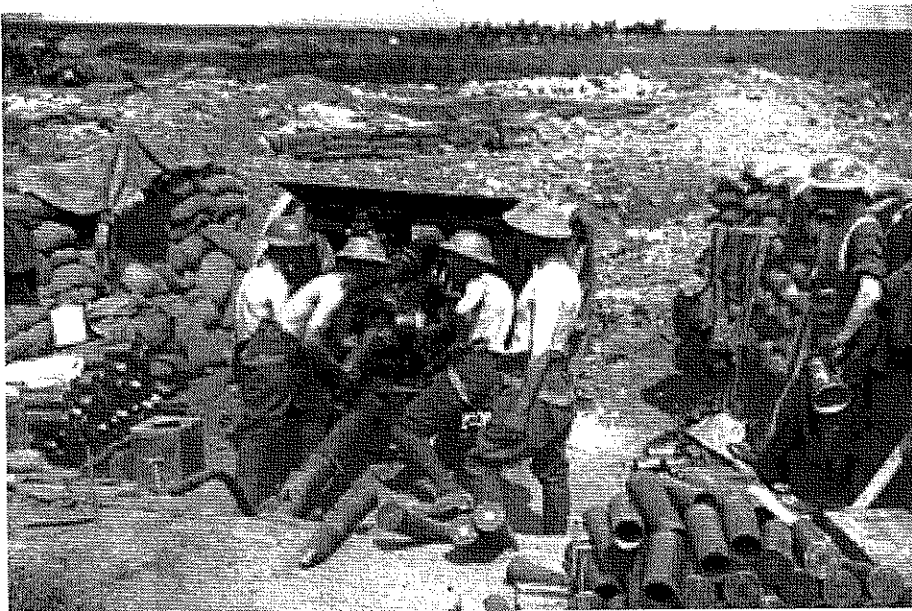


Image 7 is a posed shot of a British artillery unit in 1916 (the horses on the horizon in front of the gun were improbable if it was really in action). The men are shirtless, with browned arms and necks, and in casual poses. (IWM Q4066)

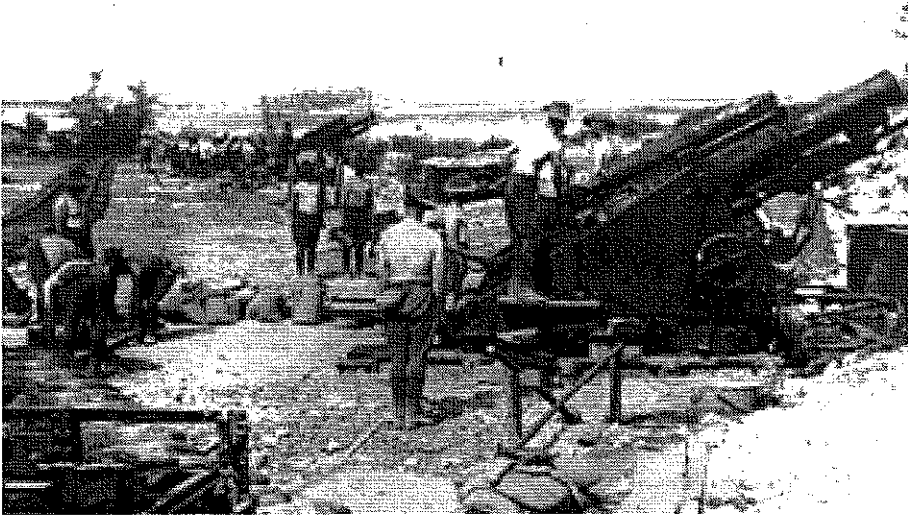


Image 8 is an equally posed photograph of an Australian battery in 1916, similarly shirtless, but their white torsos reveal that this state of dress is as uncommon with them as with the British gunners. Furthermore, their stiff poses around the gun are reminiscent of the *Murphy* still, and in total contradiction of the informal image of the Anzac legend. It is hardly surprising that all three Gallipoli films of 1915-1916 represented the Australian soldier in British terms, when the same standards apparently also affected the behaviour of real Australian soldiers, at least when the camera was about. The fear that the Australian would not prove to be as good a soldier as the Englishman is evident in the films, stills and photographs, where Australian actors and soldiers are in effect more English than the English. (IWM Q4408)

What fascinates the modern scholar of the first three Gallipoli films is the version of Gallipoli that they constructed, with its similarities and differences to more recent versions. The emphasis on manhood and nationalism have remained. However, in 1915-1916 the nationalism was unambiguously Imperial. The heavy-handed racist anti-German/Turkish sentiment and naked enthusiasm for war are two other obvious differences in the representation of this key Australian legend.

Endnotes

¹ Raymond Evans, *Loyalty and Disloyalty: Social Conflict on the Queensland Homefront, 1914-18*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, p. 30; Australian Archives (AA) (ACT) Department of Defence [I]; B539; AIF 144/1/274A

² Often referred to in contemporary literature as *A Hero...* rather than *The Hero....* Changes of film titles were common in early cinema.

³ *Lone Hand*, 1 October 1915

⁴ *Australian Variety*, 24 May 1916

⁵ *Sun*, 4 July 1915

⁶ Jane Ross, *The Myth of the Digger: The Australian Soldier in two World Wars*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1985 p. 41

⁷ Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 71

⁸ *Lone Hand*, 1 October 1915

⁹ K. S. Inglis, "The Australians at Gallipoli — I", *Historical Studies*, Vol 14, No 54, April 1970, p. 227. He was quoting an extract from *The Anzac Book*.

¹⁰ *Lone Hand*, 1 October 1915

¹¹ *Age*, 16 July 1915

¹² *Lone Hand*, 1 October 1915; *Age*, 16 July 1915, 17 July 1915

¹³ *Bulletin*, 22 July 1915

¹⁴ *Australian Variety*, 23 February 1916

¹⁵ *Sun*, 2 April 1916, 12 March 1916, 23 April 1916

¹⁶ *Theatre*, 1 June 1916

¹⁷ *Australian Variety*, 7 June 1916

¹⁸ AA (ACT) Department of Defence [I]; B539; AIF 144/1/274A

¹⁹ AA (ACT) Copyright Office [II]; A1336/1; 4668