

Screening Australian and New Zealand Histories
War and Society
Gallipoli
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It is difficult to underestimate the significance of the movie *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981). It is the most complete realisation of the Anzac legend in Australian cinema, and perhaps the most influential single text of any kind on the topic, as well as being considered by some to be *the* Australian movie of all time.¹ As history, it is a better indicator of what Australians from the 1980s to the present believe to be true, rather than strictly what happened, for its mythic reading, which is close enough to history, is an interpretation that perfectly articulates contemporary popular attitudes towards the event. The Anzac legend, while based on historical events, has moved beyond history to the point of myth. Myth should not be understood as meaning 'untrue; myth is a belief which explains the nature of reality, the purpose of being or the ideal of a society. The Anzac legend takes real events and characters and mythologises them so that they stand for what is best and truest about Australia and Australians. *Gallipoli* captures popular belief about Anzac so well that nearly thirty years later, it still stands as the embodiment of the modern Anzac legend.

Yet the Anzac legend is not an immutable received truth, for it has its own history of development. The evolving Anzac legend was for many years a contested theme in Australian nationalism. During the Great War (1914-1918) it was largely a tool of the Australian and New Zealand Governments to foster support for the Imperial war effort and to boost recruiting. Between the wars its legacy was subject to a bitter and protracted battle between radical larrikin republicans and conservative Empire loyalists. With government support, the conservatives won the battle, fashioning a triumphalist, Imperial version, while largely suppressing competing stories. Both during and after the Second World War, Anzac stories were largely eclipsed in the public consciousness by heroic British and American war films. Nevertheless, for the first half of the twentieth century, the Anzac legend was couched within a broader British Imperial identity.

In the 1960s and 1970s a new generation rediscovered Australian nationalism, and broke with its British past, refashioning the Anzac legend to suit its independent temper. With the original Anzacs fast disappearing, their story evolved into an increasingly sentimental, uncontested (outside of academic circles), unifying mythology of Anzac. In the tough economic times of the 1980s, a national cinema which broadcast populist nationalistic themes was a suitable recipient of government subsidies. *Gallipoli* emerged at the beginning of the decade, with a broad, receptive audience for its message.

Gallipoli's success owed much to its careful craftsmanship as a film: David Williamson's screenplay was a solid foundation, Peter Weir's direction was at its fluent best, the acting largely impressive (despite Mel Gibson's tendency to overact), Russell Boyd and John Seale provided outstanding visuals, and the music was particularly effective, especially the haunting Albinoni's Adagio which powerfully communicated the sense of futility Weir was striving for. The result is a handsome and emotionally engaging film that won plaudits, placing it among the very best of Australian films. However, its cinematic artistry fails to account fully for its triumph

and enduring reputation. What the film achieves is a rich and polysemic texture of mythological significance. It can be read as the ultimate popular text on the Anzac legend, or as a celebration of male friendship, or about what is 'intrinsically Australian'.² These are of course overlapping categories, but they offer different entry points for audiences, thus widening its appeal.

The film engages the Australian landscape, and connects Egypt and Gallipoli with Australia, the latter quite literally since the Gallipoli scenes were shot on the Port Lincoln coast of South Australia. Even so, the alien landscapes of Egypt and 'Gallipoli' are no stranger than the Australian outback, particularly the sequences set on the salt pan. The use of iconic landscapes makes the film's themes more accessible and familiar to Australian audiences. It badges the story as truly Australian, even if key events happen overseas. In the Australian legend, the landscape is one of the formative influences on the bushman, and the continuity of landscapes suggests that the bushman Anzacs would be equally adept at survival in their new-but-familiar environment.

At the heart of the movie is the friendship of Archy Hamilton (Mark Lee) and Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson), surrounded by several other mates: Les, Billy, Barney and Snowy. While international audiences can read it in the broad conventions of a buddy movie, for Australian audiences it holds special significance, as mateship is popularly held to be a characteristically, even uniquely, Australian quality (although in fact it exists in other armies under different names like 'kamerad', 'pal' or 'chum'), and is one of the core attributes of the Anzac. The virtual absence of women from the film conforms to the overwhelmingly male quality of Australian mythology.

The power of the Anzac legend partly lies in the way it draws together previous characters of Australian national mythology such as the convict, bushranger, digger and bushman, and rolls them into a single character: the Anzac. He is a rough, unsophisticated, practical bushman, unsentimental and undemonstrative, yet with a tender heart, honest, hardworking when it is needed, yet with a laconic sense of humour and a tendency to drink and larrikinism. He is an underdog, always battling an incompetent and corrupt hierarchy, either winning through his essential virtues, or becoming a martyr through the folly of other's mistakes. As such, he is the quintessential Australian. The main characters of Gallipoli collectively express all the facets of the Anzac/Australian archetype. The actions of the men in Cairo encapsulate this, with their boorish and racist Ocker attitudes humorously portrayed as the behaviour of fundamentally honest, decent men.

Peter Weir was moved to make a film about the Great War because of his desire to give Australians 'a view of themselves that they've never had before, a feeling of context and of special separateness.' He felt that Anzac history was a likely way to do this.³ His initial intention to make a film about the Western Front was deflected by the observation that Gallipoli was the obvious subject, given its centrality to the Anzac legend. Weir visited the peninsula, collecting relics from the battlefield which prior to the mass invasion of Antipodean tourists was liberally littered with the debris of war. Inspired by the tangibility of history, he worked with playwright David Williamson, fashioning several scripts until they had, in his words, 'come as close to touching the source of the myth as we could.'⁴ Semi-documentary screenplays were abandoned because while they were too literal, thus failing to capture the emotional meaning of

Gallipoli. In the end, they created two fictional friends, inspired by a line from Bean's official history about two athletic brothers, and wove a compelling story around them, setting the end of the story at the battle for the Nek in early August 1915, rather than the cliché of the landings on 25 April. The Nek remains a controversial battle, with historical debate over whether it was a diversion for the New Zealand attack on Chunuk Bair or for the British landings at Suvla Bay.

Those involved in making the film laboured to get the film historically 'right', ensuring that the fine details, particularly visual, would be correct. Weir considered many of the extras to be re-enacting rather than acting,⁵ and the desire for historicity became so strong that he had to emphasise that the work was entertainment, not strict history. He feared that the enthusiasm of the cast and crew for capturing the myth would turn the film into a history lesson instead of entertainment, apparently failing to distinguish between the events on Gallipoli and the Anzac legend, which suggests some confusion in his mind between history, the myth and the movie.⁶ The film presents considerable factual material about the campaign, and at one level can be read as accurate. Uniforms, gunsmoke and many other details and events are more or less correct, although the story takes understandable cinematic licence with pedantic details such as representing just three waves of attack, not four, at the Nek. Typically of cinema, it takes a simplistic and linear view of cause and effect, failing to explore alternative possibilities and debates, for example over the purpose of the attack at the Nek, or the fact that many Australian men at that time had a good grasp of international issues and were not ignorant of the causes of the war.

In the end, however, a movie's most powerful representation of history is not at the factual level but at the emotional and mythic level, and *Gallipoli* gives a particularly powerful mythic significance to these events. The British are consistently portrayed as useless, with foppish, dogmatic, and condescendingly foolish officers, and lazy soldiers, enjoying quiet cups of tea while Australians sacrifice their lives. The blond Archy (his name suggests archetype) tragically embodies the anti-British theme of the film: a pure soul and naïve believer in the greatness of the British Empire, he is eventually killed by the stupidity of the system he idealised. Most unfortunate is the portrayal of Colonel Robinson, modelled on the real-life Colonel Antill. The film portrays him with a British accent, giving the impression of pig-headed British leadership when in fact the officer responsible was Australian.

Despite Anzac Cove being awash with nationalities, New Zealanders not least among them, the movie is populated almost exclusively by Australians, except for the British High Command and the occasional Turkish soldier. The fact that the support troops for the Nek attack were actually British is glossed over. The only foreigners given any real coverage are the Egyptians in Cairo where they form part of the exotic background that bemuse, horrify and fascinate the men. Effectively, this film is less about the Gallipoli campaign than it is an exploration of what Gallipoli means to Australians. Hence its narrow focus on advancing the bushman-Anzac stereotype and its consistently anti-British attitude. This makes it the archetypal Anzac film, for it follows the Australian tradition (which began in July 1915) of making films about Anzac that glorify and idealise the Anzac as the embodiment of what it means to be Australian.

Key Sources:

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¹ David Stratton, *The Avocado Plantation: Boom and bust in the Australian film industry*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1990, 22

² Jane Freebury, 'Screening Australia: Gallipoli- a study of nationalism on film', *Media Information Australia*, No 43, February 1987, 7

³ Peter Weir, Interview, *Cineaste*, Vol 11, No 4, 1982, 42

⁴ Peter Weir, Interview, *Literary Film Quarterly*, Vol 9, No 4, 1981, 214

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bill Gammage, 'Working on Gallipoli', in *The First Australian History and Film conference Papers 1982*. Anne Hutton (ed). Sydney: The History and Film Conference, 1983, 70