Alfred Rolfe: Forgotten Pioneer Australian Film Director

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Abstract:

Alfred Rolfe was arguably the most prolific silent era Australian director. He was responsible for more than 25 feature films, encompassing the bushranger genres, early Australian war cinema, and various melodramas. Many of his films were both critical and commercial successes. The only surviving footage is scenes from two of his 1915 war films. This important director has been overshadowed by his contemporaries, particularly Raymond Longford. This paper argues that Rolfe's contribution to early Australian cinema was significant, not just in volume, but also in artistic terms, in subject matter, and in popular appeal. The centenary of Anzac is also the centenary of Australia's first Gallipoli movie, Rolfe's *The Hero of the Dardanelles* (1915), which was one of the most successful films at the box office for its time.

Keywords: Rolfe, Alfred; Australian cinema; silent film; theatre; Anzac cinema; Bushranger films.

The street names of the Canberra suburb of Chapman are a treasure trove for the Australian film buff. There is, among others, Rafferty Street, Rene Street, Lipman Street, Tudawali Place, Thring Street, Doyle Terrace, Tauchert Street, and Gavin Place. In one corner of the suburb is the cul de sac Rolfe Place, a rare memorial to the achievements of forgotten actor-producer-director Alfred Rolfe, and the result of lobbying by film scholar Andrew Pike (Email, Andrew Pike to author, December 22, 2014).

In a theatre and film career that spanned four decades (1883-1918) Alfred Rolfe delivered thousands of stage performances in over 100 play productions throughout Australia, New Zealand and Britain; became one of the most prolific Australian film directors of the silent era (indeed, of any era); made some of the most popular local movies of his time; directed Raymond Longford and Lottie Lyell in their first film roles; and depicted iconic heroes such as Captain Starlight, Captain Midnight and Rufus Dawes on stage and screen. Yet he is barely remembered today, even among Australian film and theatre aficionados.

Part of this is down to bad luck: only fragments from two of his films are known to survive, and he effectively retired from the film industry by 1918. Yet Rolfe was not particularly well known even at the peak of his career. He gave precious few interviews, and received minimal publicity, especially as a filmmaker. His career was also overshadowed by his wife, stage star Lily Dampier, and her father, legendary actor-manager-playwright Alfred Dampier. Towards the end of his career, one newspaper referred to him, not as a film director, but as the 'one time leading man in the late Alfred Dampier's company' ('£4,000,000 for Schoolboy,' *Maitland Mercury*, May 31, 1919). During two decades of retirement, Rolfe renounced all involvement in show business, and his place as the leading Australian director of the silent era was taken by his one-time assistant and support actor, Raymond Longford.

There were no late career interviews, or tell-all memoirs, not even an appearance at the 1927 Royal Commission into the film industry (Australian Government 1928). It was and remains a remarkably low profile for someone who worked at the high profile end of an industry whose life-blood is publicity. As such, it is time a spotlight was shone on this important but largely unknown filmmaker.

Rolfe was born Alfred Roker in Charles St, Fitzroy, Melbourne, on 18 April 1862 (Birth certificate 1862/7598. Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria), the son of Arthur Roker (1828 c - 22 September 1902), a baker, and Mary Ann Holman (1830 c - 1897), both originally from England ('Cremorne', *The Daily News*, June 2, 1897). A later profile said he was 'a native of Ballarat,' a town where his father spent some time in the 1850s ('The Stage', *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine,* January 1, 1904; Death Certificate NSW Registration Number 21579/1943; 'Court of Mines', *The Star,* December 23, 1858). It is unclear when or why Rolfe adopted his new surname, but he was utilizing it when he began acting professionally by 1883 for Charles Holloway's Dramatic Company ('Advertising', *The Argus*, May 12, 1883), one of the numerous actor-manager-led stock companies that dominated the theatre scene at the time. Rolfe toured with them for over five years, appearing in a wide variety of roles, usually as the minor male juvenile, such as 'the not unimportant part of Visano' in *Merchant of Venice* ('Royal Princess Theatre', *Bendigo Advertiser,* April 23, 1887). In 1889, Rolfe toured with the George Darrell Company for over a year, ('Theatre Royal', *Tasmanian News,* March 18, 1889), before joining the Alfred Dampier Company, the most significant association of his professional life ('Advertising', *The Argus*, September 27, 1890).

Dampier's company specialized predominantly in melodramatic spectacles: injustice and thwarted love, spiced up with large casts, elaborate scenery, horse riding stunts, and stage tanks. These plays usually starred Alfred and his daughter Lily in the leads, with Dampier's wife, son, and other daughter as the supporting cast (Fotheringham 1985).

Dampier staged adaptations of British and Australian stories, many of which he co-authored; one particular play of note was his massively popular version of *Robbery Under Arms* (Fotheringham 1985). He also produced plays by overseas authors including Shakespeare and other English classics. Dampier was based at the Alexandra Theatre in Melbourne, though he frequently sublet the theatre to others while touring. Rolfe quickly established himself as the Company's leading male juvenile, often playing in romantic parts opposite Lily.

The early 1890s were difficult years for the Dampiers. They were plagued by public scandals: the family maid killed herself by taking rat poison after a love affair with his stage manager (or 'scenic artist'), Alfred Tischbauer ('Distressing Suicide', *The Australasian,* January 2, 1892); and Dampier fired one of his leading men for drinking on the job, only to find out a few months later that the 'conceited ape' had been secretly married to Lily for two years (she would divorce him on the grounds of desertion and adultery) ('Melbourne Echoes', *The Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser*, June 24, 1892; 'A Theatrical Divorce Case', *Barrier Miner,* June 18, 1892). Things were tough financially, too: the Great Depression of the 1890s caused box office takings to decline, so Dampier toured New Zealand in 1893 in an attempt to recoup the company fortunes; this proved a financial disaster, resulting in the family having to pawn its jewelry to pay their fare home; Dampier also injured himself on the trip falling through a trap door, leading to health problems that dogged him for the rest of his life. Tischbauer then sued Dampier for unpaid wages, leading to insolvency proceedings. On 3 July 1893, Dampier voluntarily sequestrated his estate in the Insolvency Court, where his (many) creditors

included his two daughters, his wife, and Alfred Rolfe ('Insolvency of Mr. Alfred Dampier', *The Argus*, July 4, 1893).

Rolfe nonetheless stayed with the company throughout all this time, in part because of his growing relationship with Lily. The two married on 12 July 1893 in Surry Hills, Sydney (Marriage certificate 918/1893 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages); their son Sydney Alfred Rolfe was born on 7 September 1893 (Birth certificate 2443/1893 NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages), indicating a rushed wedding, but Lily's second attempt at matrimony was far more successful than her first and the union lasted until Lily's death in 1915.

When Dampier went to England in 1894, Rolfe stayed in Australia with his wife and son, performing with the Maggie Moore Company ('Dramatic Notes', *The Australasian*, June 30, 1894). However, following Dampier's return in 1895, Rolfe and Lily went back to work for Dampier and toured for two years. Rolfe gradually became his father-in-law's 'right hand': he graduated to leading roles (notably Rufus Dawes in Dampier's adaptation of *For the Term of His Natural Life*), worked as a stage manager and took over his father-in-law's parts whenever the latter was ill ('Amusements. Her Majesty's. – "His Natural Life."', *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 2, 1895; 'Stageland', *Evening News*, July 8, 1899).

Dampier, Rolfe, and Lily went to England in 1897 for a working holiday. Rolfe and Lily secured some acting roles and stayed on for over a year, touring the provinces and performing in London ('Mems About Mummers', *Quiz and the Lantern*, November 4, 1897; 'On and Off the Stage', *Table Talk*, August 5, 1898). Although tempted to stay in England, Rolfe and Lily ultimately decided to rejoin Dampier's company in Australia in early 1899 playing to audiences around the country for the next six years. *Robbery Under Arms* remained their most performed work; another added to the repertoire was *The Bush King*, adapted by Dampier from an original play by W.J. Lincoln.

By the early 1900s, Rolfe was technically a stage star, although he never commanded the respect, reviews, publicity, and/or billing of his wife or father-in-law. One report referred to him as 'Mr Lily Dampier' and an in-depth profile of Lily Dampier in 1901 discussed Lily and her father in great detail, but only mentioned Rolfe in passing ('Theatrical Tit-Bits', *Sydney Sportsman*, August 21, 1907; 'Miss Lily Dampier "At Home"', *Table Talk*, July 18, 1901).

Critical reviews of Rolfe's performances were mixed. According to New Zealand's *Stage* magazine, he was 'an actor of brilliance on a somewhat wide range, a little overshadowed, perhaps, by the stars with whom he has been so long associated, but by no means obscured' ('The Stage', *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine,* January 1, 1904). One review said his 'dramatic method is lacking in sentiment and polish' but that he 'showed a good deal of ability' ('Amusements. Her Majesty's. – "His Natural Life"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 2, 1895). Another complained that Rolfe 'lacks warmth. He is too fixed of feature and formal of voice. His only idea of expression seems to lie in a steeling of the eye, and a setting of the under jaw, which is unfortunate as he is a presentable young man' ('In Front and Behind', *The Elector*, July 14, 1900). 'Alfred Rolfe cannot play the part of a villain,' declared *Punch,* adding that 'in his cradle, virtue must have claimed him for her own. Even the cigarette of audacious vice he smokes most unconvincingly. The fair wig of the hero, not the raven locks of scoundrelism,

clusters most becomingly about his classic brow' ('Sydney Shows', *Punch*, August 30, 1900). Another critic claimed that Rolfe 'is more at home in parts which require ragged simplicity than in those where dress-suits and artificial manners are looked for' ('In Front and Behind', *The Newsletter: an Australian Paper for Australian People*, December 22, 1900).

Ill-health eventually forced Alfred Dampier into retirement, making his last stage appearance in 1905. For a time, Rolfe and Lily toured rural Victoria with the 'Lily Dampier Company,' followed by another working stint in England. They returned home in 1908, just prior to Dampier's death ('The Strutter's Page', *The Newsletter: an Australian Paper for Australian People*, January 13, 1906; 'Personal', *Kalgoorlie Miner*, March 7, 1906; 'Music and Dramas', *Mercury*, September 10, 1907; 'Death of Alfred Dampier', *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 25, 1908).

In early 1908, it was reported that Rolfe and Lily were 'still resting' at the Dampier family home in Paddington, Sydney, 'but are likely, one of these days, to be out with their own show again.' The writer added that Rolfe 'puts in the spare time walking through his vast estates, plantations, and so on' ('Theatrical Tit-Bits', *Sydney Sportsman*, February 5, 1908). An article two years later said that Rolfe 'is now supposed to be comfortably supplied with this world's goods,' leading one to assume that, unlike his father-in-law, Rolfe was a capable manager of money ('Theatrical Gossip', *The Newsletter: an Australian Paper for Australian People*, February 25, 1911).

Rolfe's first recorded involvement in the film industry came in 1909. He acted as NSW 'general manager' for the exhibition of a documentary about the world championship fight between Tommy Burns and Jack Johnson, which was produced by theatre owner and entrepreneur Charles Cozens Spencer ('Advertising', *Illawarra Mercury*, January 1, 1909). It is unclear how Rolfe became involved; however, someone with extensive experience in stage management and touring theatre productions was a natural candidate for the job (indeed, most of Australia's first producers, directors, distributors, and exhibitors had theatrical backgrounds). A contemporary report said that this new position 'seems to agree with' Rolfe 'better than being charged from pillar to post … in *Robbery Under Arms* or causing "fearful damage" as *The Bush King*' ('The Fight on Canvas', *Glen Innes Examiner*, February 2, 1909).

Rolfe and Lily returned to the stage in 1910. The pair headed Philip Lytton's company on a tour of Australia and New Zealand, with a repertoire that included some old Dampier favourites, such as *The Bush King* and *Robbery Under Arms* ('Theatrical Gossip', *The Newsletter: an Australian Paper for Australian People*, September 17, 1910). However, this was to be their last theatre performance. On their return, they received another offer from Spencer: for Rolfe to direct and star opposite Lily in *Captain Midnight, The Bush King* (1911), a film version of *The Bush King*.

Rolfe had never made a film before, but at this stage, few people in the world had, and certainly no one knew the source material better. Rolfe also later claimed that 'before attempting to direct the making of a photoplay, I studied methods for 12 months' (Rolfe 1917). Rolfe did not elaborate on what constituted 'studied methods,' but distributing a movie throughout New South Wales would have given him opportunity to familiarise himself with the new medium of cinema.

Rolfe had considerable help on his first film from the legendary Ernest Higgins as cameraman, and Alan Williamson as line producer; the latter claimed that the budget rose from £300 to £800 and the script was 'written by a ticket collector on the Sydney ferries' (according to contemporary descriptions, it appears the script was a condensed highlights version of the play) (Alan J Williamson, MS 677254, National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), circa 1949-51, 14; 'General Gossip', *Referee*, February 8, 1911). Highly experienced stage actors Raymond Longford and Lottie Lyell appeared in the cast, supporting Rolfe and Lily; Longford also assisted behind the scenes. The source material was ideal for cinematic treatment, and the budget allowed location filming in Frenchs Forest and some spectacular horse stunts. Reviews were excellent and the box office strong: Williamson said it recouped its cost in one cinema alone (Williamson, MS 677254, NFSA, circa 1949-51; 'Lyceum – "Captain Midnight"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 8, 1911). According to one cinema history, a scene of Captain Midnight leaping off a cliff on horseback into a river and swimming away amid a hail of bullets 'soon became obligatory for bushrangers in Australian cinema folklore' (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 14).

Spencer promptly put Rolfe, Lily, and Longford to work on a follow up, a version of Dampier's adaptation of *Robbery Under Arms*, which was called *Captain Starlight, or Gentleman of the Road* (1911) to avoid confusion with rival productions of the same story (Fotheringham, 1985). Rolfe knew this material even better than *The Bush King*, having performed in at least four different roles in various productions on and off since 1890. There are copies of *Captain Starlight* scripts for certain actors in the NFSA; the play has been cut up into different sections and stuck together (Title 0650839 Component 1 M/S collection, NFSA). Williamson declared that 'it was not as good a film as' *Captain Midnight* 'but still made a lot of money,' and contemporary newspaper reports support this (Williamson, MS 677254, NFSA, circa 1949-51, 15; 'Lyceum – "Captain Starlight"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 March 1911, 'Captain Starlight', *Argus,* April 10, 1911; Pike and Cooper, 1998, 14–15).

Rolfe made a third bushranger movie for Spencer, called *Dan Morgan* (1911) (though some sources do not credit him as director), which was based on a well-known true story. Critical reaction to this film was again positive, in particular, praising the location work, and although it was less widely distributed than the first two Rolfe/Spencer movies, it was popular. Lower returns may have been due to the growing political concern about the possible bad influences of bushranger films, which would soon be banned from exhibition in New South Wales (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 20–21; 'The Lyceum', *Truth,* May 28, 1911; *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 3, 1911; 'The Theatrical Gazette', *Referee*, May 24, 1911; Shirley and Adams, 1989, 53).

Rolfe's final film for Spencer was an adaptation of Dampier's stage version of *For the Term of His Natural Life*, called *The Life of Rufus Dawes* (1911). Despite having the Dampier-added happy ending not in the original novel and receiving a US release as part of a bulk purchase of Australian films, the film appears not to have been widely seen. In part, this was due to a legal challenge from the daughter of Marcus Clarke, which saw the film withdrawn from circulation (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 21; 'Broadway Theatre', *Truth*, June 18, 1911; 'Advertising', *Examiner*, January 23, 1912; T. S. Imrie, 'Australian Notes', *The Moving Picture*

World, November 4, 1916; Catherine Bond, 'The play goes on eternally', *Intellectual Property Journal,* Volume 24, 61–77).

Rolfe then parted ways with Spencer and joined a new company, Australian Photo-Play Company. Spencer promptly hired Raymond Longford for an adaptation of *The Fatal Wedding* (1911), which also starred Lyell. It was a tremendous success, and launched Longford as a director and Lyell as a star (Shirley and Adams, 1989, 31; 'Australian Films', *Adelaide Advertiser*, June 17, 1927).

It is unclear why Rolfe left Spencer. Three of their four films were popular, especially *Captain Midnight* and *Captain Starlight* ; Rolfe and Lily had performed Spencer's next production, *The Fatal Wedding*, on stage and would have seemed the perfect combination for the film version. (Not to mention the second Spencer-Longford-Lyell film, *The Romantic Story of Margaret Catchpole* (1911), which was based on the Dampier play, *An English Lass*, which had been performed on stage by Rolfe and Lily) ('An English Lass', *Evening News*, September 4, 1893). Questions arise over Rolfe's departure: it may have been a dispute over money, creative control, ego, or temperament; or perhaps Spencer insisted on employing both of them and Lily did not want to act any more (her health was poor and she soon retired); or maybe Rolfe found it difficult working for Spencer, who tended to attract turmoil throughout his business life (Diane Collins, 'Spencer, Cosens (1874–1930)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 1990). Graham Shirley revealed in email correspondence that it was rumoured that Spencer was dissatisfied with the quality of Rolfe's work on those first movies (Shirley, December 11, 2014). Indeed, Longford later claimed that he directed *Midnight*, *Starlight* and *Rufus Dawes* ('Australian Films', *Daily News*, 18 December, 1931). Complicating this are the claims by Alan J Williamson, who said that Longford was a 'great assistance' on the first two films; only mentions Alfred Rolfe in his capacity as actor, never as director; and said that he, Williamson, directed *Starlight*, as well as being cameraman, editor, scriptwriter, and titles writer – possibly indicating a tendency to exaggerate (Williamson, MS, 677254, NFSA, circa 1949-51, 15).

Records are so scarce from this period that it is impossible to ascertain the exact extent of Rolfe's contribution to these Spencer movies. But as the role of director was an evolving one at this early stage of the cinema, often blended with that of other positions such as producer, the opaqueness of Rolfe's specific contribution is not surprising. The authors are inclined to believe that it remained significant: Rolfe was highly familiar with the material of at least three of the four films from his theatre work; he was experienced as a stage manager; and he certainly knew acting. He also received an offer to be the in-house director for three other production companies, so his ability was clearly held in high regard in the industry.

The Australian Photo-Play Company was established in June 1911 by Stanley Crick ('The Australian Photo-Play Company, Limited', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 14, 1911). Originally, Rolfe was to be one of two in-house directors, the other being Jack Gavin, but Gavin soon left the company and it was Rolfe who ended up directing the bulk of the company's product. Rolfe later claimed that he created 'twenty[-]five 3 and 4 reel pictures' over two years (Rolfe 1917), an output that elevated him to Australia's most productive film director of his time. Given that his directing career was much shorter than many of his

contemporaries, Rolfe's achievement is remarkable. In addition to many dramas, he also directed documentaries.

The movies were mostly shot at Australian Photo-Play's open air studio at Summer Hill in Sydney. The company used its stock key cast and crew across the films, in much the same way as the touring theatre companies with which Rolfe would have been so familiar. He acted only occasionally in the company's movies; Lily seems not to have appeared in any.

None of the films survive, but descriptions of most of them do. These descriptions indicate heavily formulaic melodrama, spiced up with spectacle. This formula was also used in the majority of Rolfe's stage work for Alfred Dampier, with the added benefit of location filming (Shirley and Adams, 1989, 40). As Shirley and Adams explain further:

> The Australian Photo-Play formula was a string of sensational incidents climaxed by a chase, with actuality footage sometimes cunningly incorporated ... Nearly all the APP films made use of popular conceptions of the bush, peopling their stories with marauding Aboriginals, vengeful settlers, English outcasts and shamed women. Revenge melodramas were the staple. (Shirley and Adams, 1989, 40)

Plots frequently revolved around a love triangle, falsely accused heroes escaping from prison, the return of long-lost children, the evil city versus the purity of the bush, and a climax with a horse race and/or train crash.

Some movies nonetheless stand out. *Moora Neeya* (1911) (with a screenplay by Rolfe's teenage son Sydney) was arguably the first Australian feature film to focus on an Aboriginal theme. *Moora Neeya* was also notable for featuring genuine location filming in Brewarrina on the Darling River (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 21-22; 'Theatrical Tit-Bits', *Sydney Sportsman*, July 26, 1911; 'Movie "Heavy" Chats Lightly', *Winner*, December 22, 1915). *The Lady Outlaw* (1911) was the first – and, to date, the only – Australian film to center on a female bushranger (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 23-24). *The Mates from the Murrumbidgee* (1911) was about two friends in love with the same girl who fight in the Boer War, making it arguably Australia's first war movie (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 24; 'Dramatic Notes', *Australasian*, September 16, 1911). *The Cup* (1911) had a climax involving the Melbourne Cup and included actuality footage of the 1911 Cup inserted at the last minute (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 27-28; 'Advertising', *Argus*, November 6, 1911). *What Women Suffer* (1911) and *Caloola* (1911) were based on popular plays (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 24, 28).

If the number of contemporary newspaper advertisements is any guide, *What Women Suffer*, *The Cup Winner* and *Caloola* were particularly popular ('Notes and Events', *Colac Herald*, January 5, 1912; 'Advertising', *Morning Bulletin*, February 6, 1912; 'Empire Theatre', *Daily Herald*, January 20, 1912). However, some of the movies were hardly screened at all and Australian Photo-Play wound up production in mid-1912, after being bought out by the Gaumont Company ('General Gossip', *Referee*, March 20, 1912). Rolfe considered that, 'Despite all the drawbacks we turned out many very successful pictures and not a few showman in Australia can thank the Australian Photo-Play Company for giving them a good send off' (Rolfe 1917). As the resident in-house director of Australian Photo-Play and Gaumont, it is possible that Rolfe also directed several other unattributed films. For example, *Call of the Bush* (1912), *The Opium Runner* (1913), and *The Clue of the Lost Handkerchief* (1913) had melodramatic plots that were very

much in line with Rolfe's earlier movies ('Advertising', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, December 25, 1912; 'Wonderland Pictures', *Mildura Cultivator*, January 25, 1913; Pike and Cooper, 1998, 37; 'Moving Pictures', *Referee*, August 27, 1913).

Gaumont also wound back film production, but Rolfe was not unemployed for long: he started at the Fraser Film Release and Photographic Company in 1914. This company – exhibitors who moved into production – had just made a series of movies with Raymond Longford, but the relationship ended badly, resulting in a lawsuit ('Law Report', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 6, 1914). Rolfe replaced Longford as the company's in-house director, and made at least two features for them: *The Day* (1914), a war movie adapted from a topical jingoistic poem, and *The Sunny South* (1915), a popular 1889 melodrama that Rolfe had performed in. Neither appears to have been particularly successful, despite the first film drawing on populist tales of German war atrocities, and the latter's ageing pedigree as a stage hit ('Amusements', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, May 20, 1889; Pike and Cooper, 1998, 52). Subsequently, the Fraser Film Release and Photographic Company pulled back on production (the company would dissolve in 1918) and Rolfe was looking for work again. In the meantime, Lily oversaw a production of *Robbery Under Arms* at the Brisbane Theatre Royal in February-March 1914. It is uncertain if she directed it, but if so, she probably became Australia's first female theatre director without taking a leading acting role (Email, Richard Fotheringham to author, June, 2 2015).

In November 1914, it was written that Rolfe and Lily were 'wandering the globe' together, but he must have returned to Sydney in December, when *The Sunny South* was being filmed ('The Theatre', *The Catholic Press*, November 19, 1914). In early 1915, he went to work for the large distribution company Australasian Films, who were looking to add feature films to their production of 'industrials' (documentaries of various industries) and short films, with Rolfe as in-house director for all three genres as well as

Rolfe was directing a movie in Sydney in February 1915 when Lily fell ill while visiting Melbourne. Rolfe rushed to join her, moving her to a private hospital, but it was too late and she died on 6 February. 'Her death occurred rather suddenly,' said one report; the death certificate stated the cause as uremia from chronic Bright's disease, declaring that Lily had suffered from it for three weeks ('Plays and Players', *Weekly Times*, February 13, 1915; Death certificate 1915/2487 Births Deaths and Marriages Victoria). The funeral was held two days later and was 'well attended by numbers of leading members of the [acting] profession' ('Melbourne Theatrical', *Referee,* February 10, 1915).

Exactly one month later, Lily's mother died of a stroke in Pennsylvania, USA ('Death of Mrs. Dampier', *The Maitland Daily Mercury*, May 6, 1915). Lily's sister died in 1919, while touring in a show in Nebraska; no one could track down Lily's brother (who had fled Australia following the exposure of his own secret marriage in 1914). As a result, Rolfe inherited the copyright to Dampier's plays, and future productions of *Robbery Under Arms* (the only one that other companies appeared interested in performing) would be presented 'by arrangement with Alfred Rolfe' ('Social and Personal', *Queensland Times*, May 29, 1919; 'Advertising', *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 28, 1917).

Rolfe resumed his directorial career with Australasian Films after the death of his wife. His first movie was a government-sponsored wartime propaganda

featurette, *Will They Never Come*? (1915), which was based on a long-running recruiting cartoon ('Will They Never Come?', *Sunday Times*, March 28, 1915). The popularity of *Will They Never Come*? led to a feature-length sequel, *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, in July 1915, which was a massive box office hit. The film portrayed the recent Anzac landings at Gallipoli and was rapturously received by an Australian public hungry for any news about the war. Both films featured a love interest named 'Lily', almost certainly in honour of his recently-deceased wife (Reynaud, 2007, 28; Paul Byrnes, 'The Hero of the Dardanelles', *Australian Screen Online*, http://aso.gov.au/titles/features/hero-of-the-dardanelles/notes/).

This success encouraged Australasian Films to splash out on a tale of the Eureka Rebellion, *The Loyal Rebel* (1915), which was framed as an allegory of Australia's fighting spirit. It received good reviews but, like all versions of this story, was a box office disappointment. According to screenwriter Arthur Wright, Rolfe, as director, 'made a fine job of it, judged on the standard of the day, but though it was a good effort it did not pull big business' ('To Pana's Page On Passing and Past Shows', *Referee*, July 1, 1931). It was back to World War One movies for Rolfe with the critically acclaimed *How We Beat the Emden* (1915), which incorporated documentary footage of the wrecked Emden at Cocos Island ('"World War" Pictures', *The Mail*, May 20, 1916; Pike and Cooper, 1998, 56).

Rolfe's next film was *A Man – That's All* (1916). This movie's existence was unknown until recently, and therefore, it is not recorded in the established texts of the Australian film industry. Like his other war films, it combined a stock, melodramatic plot with genuine war footage; it was used as a recruiting tool by the Australian Government and, thus, was widely seen ('Triangle Pictures Are Well Received in Melbourne, Australia; Four Reeler Made in Antipodes Meets with Approval in Sydney', *Motion Picture* News, July 8, 1916; 'A Man, That's All', *Barrier Miner*, March 11, 1916; 'West's Pictures', *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, July 12, 1916; 'A Man, That's All', *Warrnambool Standard*, February 19, 1918).

In 1916, it was reported that Rolfe had 'produced more Australian pictures than any other Australian director' (T. S. Imrie, 'Australian Notes', *Moving Picture World*, May, 1916). Rolfe said at the same time that the greatest difficulty for Australian filmmakers was they were unable to market their films in America or England. 'If this could be remedied,' said Rolfe, 'as many as fifty copies of any picture would be required and the production would then show a "worth-while" profit'. But in the Australian market of 1916, he said only four copies could be disposed of, 'which does not make much of an inducement to intending manufacturers'. Rolfe felt that 'any company with a good connection in America and England, by making uniformly good photoplays equal in standard to the imported brands, should be an immediate success' (T. S. Imrie, 'Australian Notes', *Moving Picture World*, May, 1916).

In July 1916, Rolfe finished a series of single-reel 'educational films' for Australasian Films under the generic title *Australia – A Nation* (1916), which comprised 15,000 feet of film in total ('Film News From Foreign Parts', *Motion Picture News* July-August, 1916; 'No title', *Sunday Times*, May 7, 1916). In November, it was reported that Rolfe 'has just completed a big industrial subject for this film dealing with practically every Australian industry of note' (T.S. Imrie, 'Australian Notes', *The Moving Picture World,* November 18, 1916). Rolfe later specified that he made films on gold, timber, coal, wood, rifle

manufacturing, and the national mint (Alfred Rolfe, 'Making Movies in Australia', *The Picture Show,* August 2, 1919). He also produced a series of 'picture songs'. These were films or slides shown at the cinema that were designed to accompany performances of popular songs, often with sing-a-long choruses, in some ways the forerunner of the modern-day music video ('Sydney Picture Songs', *Theatre Magazine*, February 1, 1916). When these picture songs were released in 1917, they were described by one writer as 'the best films of their kind yet made here' ('Australian Notes', *The Moving Picture World,* February 10, 1917). However, Rolfe had already 'severed his connection with Australasian Films' the previous November (T.S. Imrie, 'Australian Notes', *The Moving Picture World,* November 18, 1916).

The reason was most likely a reduction in output; Rolfe later claimed that during his 18-month stint with Australasian Films, 'my relations with this firm were of the happiest, and I shall always look back with pleasure on the time I was associated with them' (Rolfe 1917). This was stated in an article Rolfe wrote for an industry trade paper, the closest thing to a memoir he seems to have published in his life, and thus, is worth quoting in some detail. In it, he declared:

> the picture producer's lot in Australia … is not a happy one. In the majority of cases he has to write or adapt his own scenario, choose the cast, select a wardrobe, superintend the building of sets, arrange for props, find locations and is, in fact, responsible for all the annoying details of a picture even before beginning to direct it … Picture producing in Australia at the present time is almost at a standstill and I am afraid is likely to remain so for some time to come. (Rolfe, 1917).

Rolfe complained that in nine years of film directing, 'my instructions from headquarters have always been "keep expenses down to bed rock"'. He argued that this was 'a great mistake; if we want the goods we must spend money'. He felt that Australia had the locations and talent to make a film industry, and if we could appeal to 'a foreign market, then the industry would go ahead in leaps and bounds' (Rolfe, 1917).

Rolfe also complained that 'one great trouble we have had to contend with is that every other man you meet considers himself a picture producer'. He felt that inexperienced producers wasted money and scared off investors. He said that 'a director must be in absolute sympathy with his subject if he wants his picture to be successful, and his power should be absolute' (Rolfe, 1917).

Rolfe maintained that 'one of our troubles is that picture show men practically demand a certain type of picture; they want a thrill in every other scene; the artistic is a secondary consideration, as one man remarked to me. "Give a story with plenty of kick, it doesn't matter about the quality"'. He also felt it was a problem to induce 'dramatic artists of note [i.e. stage stars] to appear in pictures' because they could not be guaranteed regular employment (Rolfe, 1917).

Rolfe thought that 'there is only one way of putting the industry on a good footing, and that is a company with a capital of £25,000 offering 12 months contracts to capable artists, a number of scenarios, and the director given a free hand. Then I am certain we would be able to compete with the world' (Rolfe, 1917).

'The motion picture industry in Australia has a brilliant future,' he added. 'At present we are only "scratching" but when somebody steps in and has the court to produce pictures on a proper scale, and only then [sic] will we make an artistic

success, which will enable us to gain a market outside Australia, but a financial success also' (Rolfe, 1917).

However, none of this happened for Rolfe, who ended up making only one more film, *Cupid Camouflaged* (1918), a Red Cross fund-raising melodrama featuring a mostly amateur cast of Sydney socialites. A reviewer said: 'Rolfe had much to cope with, but he has made the best of a difficult job, and turned out a creditable piece of celluloid amusement' ('Cupid Camouflaged', *Sunday Times*, June 2, 1918; Pike and Cooper, 1998, 80). The film was not a large success.

In 1919, Rolfe expressed a desire to make a movie based on *Robbery Under Arms*, 'for which I hold the world dramatic and picture rights. No expense will be spared and I feel sure it will make one of the most successful and interesting pictures produced in Australia up to date' (Alfred Rolfe, 'Making Movies in Australia', *The Picture Show,* August 2, 1919). However, he had the rights to the play, not the novel; a film based on the novel appeared in 1920 and helped to kill off Rolfe's project. That year, he registered copyright for a new version of *The Bush King* in which the lead character no longer became a bushranger, but the movie was never made (A1336/8318, NAA, March 22, 1920).

After that, Rolfe's interests in film and theatre seemed to decline. His time was increasingly taken up with amateur athletics in the 1920s (an interest that had begun in the previous decade, perhaps as his son Sydney was growing up) and he acted as a referee and judge at various meets ('Athletics', *Saturday Referee and the Arrow*, June 24, 1916; 'Athletics', *Referee*, August 23, 1922; 'Some of the Officials at the Boys' Sports', *Referee*, October 10, 1928). There was no return to the stage or screen, not even an appearance at the 1927 Royal Commission on the Moving Picture Industry in Australia, to which Rolfe could have had a lot to contribute. In 1934, *Film Weekly* listed 79 film pioneers for Australian cinema, including Rolfe's old colleagues Raymond Longford and Stanley Crick, but not Rolfe himself (*Film Weekly,* December 13, 1934).

Rolfe died in Glengarlen Private Hospital, North Sydney, on 9 September 1943; the death certificate recorded his profession as 'actor (retired)', and said the cause was cerebral thrombosis, from which he had suffered 27 days (Death Certificate NSW Registration Number 21579/1943; 'Mr. A. Rolfe Dead', *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 13, 1943). He was survived by his son Sydney, who in 1948 sold all rights, title, and interest in the play version of *Robbery Under Arms* to Ealing Studios for £40 (MLMSS 6712, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW); however, when Ealing's parent company, Rank Films, eventually made their version in 1957, little of the play was used (Fotheringham, 1985; Webby, 2002).

Alfred Rolfe left so little of himself behind it is hard to picture what sort of person he was. Photos indicate a beefy, athletic, handsome, confident man; contemporary reviews of his acting were polite rather than enthusiastic, though rarely bad. Apart from the tragic loss of Lily, there were no public scandals or outrages in his life. Certainly, there was nothing like the drama that plagued Raymond Longford (whose career was full of lawsuits and conspiracy theories, and who wound up working as a night watchman) or Charles Cozens Spencer (who was kicked out of the company he helped found and committed suicide after going on a murderous shooting spree in Canada) or Rolfe's wife and in-laws (with their secret marriages, insolvency, and suicidal maids) (Mervyn J. Wasson, 'Longford, Raymond John Walter Hollis (1878–1959)', *Australian Dictionary of*

Biography, 1990; Fotheringham, 1985; 'A Secret Marriage', *Adelaide Advertiser*, November 4, 1914).

Based on the few writings Rolfe left behind, the difficulties of being a film director in Australia clearly wore him down. He was constantly frustrated by small budgets, unsympathetic producers, and distribution difficulties, which all contributed to his premature retirement from the industry. However, Rolfe was remarkably prolific and several of his works – *Captain Midnight*, *Captain Starlight*, *Will They Never Come?*, *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, and *How They Beat the Emden* – were the blockbusters of their day.

Evaluating his merits as a director is complicated by the scant surviving evidence of his work. The first thirteen minutes of *The Hero of the Dardanelles* is preserved in the NFSA; in April 2015, the Archive released a 22 minute partial reconstruction using additional recently discovered footage and stills to restore the trajectory of the story (*The Hero of the Dardanelles: Gallipoli Centenary Edition*. NFSA, 2015). Scenes from *How We Beat the Emden* were preserved when it was merged with another Australian Sydney-Emden film, *For Australia*, to create a new movie, *For the Honour of Australia* (1916), which was released for the British market and preserved there. Any other judgment of his merits relies on contemporary film reviews.

Both *The Hero of the Dardanelles* and *How We Beat the Emden* demonstrate a tendency to naturalistic acting, when compared with the conventions of the day. This is highlighted in particular when the footage from *How We Beat the Emden* is juxtaposed against the badly overacted *For Australia.* Contemporary critics noted the difference as well, slating *For Australia* for being 'weirdly impossible' and for being an example of how 'motion picture fakes should not be done'. A British reviewer rightly suspected that *For the Honour of Australia* was composed of two films edited together, one a 'flimsy melodrama' and the other a strong story (*Theatre*, November 1, 1915, January 1, 1916; *Bioscope,* December 7, 1916).

The Hero of the Dardanelles best shows Rolfe's ability. The film has competent directing across most of its surviving scenes, but there are moments when it truly excels. Beautifully backlit medium shots of its hero Will proposing to Lily, or of him reading her letter against a glittering sea, compare with the best film-making anywhere, as both critics and scholars have noted (*Lone Hand*, October 1, 1915; Reynaud, 2007, 24). Modern scholarship labeled it as featuring a 'fluent narrative style, with a free use of close-ups for dramatic effect' and as being filmed '[n]aturalistically, and with some sensitivity,' when comparing Rolfe's style with the kind of 'visual and narrative sophistication later attributed to Raymond Longford' (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 54; Shirley and Adams, 1989, 46, 40).

In its era, *The Hero* was considered utterly convincing and realistic, and in an age of weekly changes of film programs, it ran for months, and enjoyed a successful release in Britain. *How We Beat the Emden* also attracted praise for its convincing realism and seems to have also fared well on American screens (Reynaud, 2007, 23–4, 31). Realism is of course a relative thing: yesterday's realism is today's stagey and unconvincing performance. However, when Rolfe's scenes from both *The Hero* and *How We Beat The Emden* are measured against contemporary work, they hold up well. Both *The Hero* and *How We Beat the Emden* make extensive use of actuality footage: the former included footage of

soldiers in training at Liverpool and in Egypt, and the latter included footage of the training ship HMAS Tingira and the wrecked warship Emden beached off Cocos Island. How well the actuality footage and acted footage sit alongside each other emphasizes the restrained nature of Rolfe's directing.

Existing reviews of his films show an overwhelming majority were favourable. Of seventeen films, fourteen attracted positive reviews, and while many of them were melodramas, the word 'realistic' was commonly associated with them. Audience applause was recorded by a number of reviewers, while a British critic was effusive about the quality of *Captain Midnight*. *Captain Midnight* also garnered enthusiastic reviews around Australia for its clever conception, thrilling stunt work, sensational yet credible plot, authentic Australian atmosphere, and fine acting and cinematography, though none noted Rolfe's work as director (*Sydney Morning Herald*, February 8, 1911, *Launceston Examiner*, March 28, 1911, *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, April 22, 1911, *Port Pirie Recorder and North Western Mail*, April 29, 1911). Rolfe's war films demonstrated an ability to deliver fit-for-purpose government-commissioned films. *Will They Never Come?* was praised as, '[e]xciting throughout, capably acted, and produced … it drives its appeal home more forcibly and effectively than could be done in any other way… The director … gave the drama that technical accuracy which has been the source of such satisfaction to the Defence Department' ('Will They Never Come?', *Sydney Sunday Times*, March 23, 1915). *A Man – That's All* was praised as 'a good picture … nearer to the American style of production than any other Australian film I have seen … [and] of decided interest' ('A Man – That's All', *The Mirror of Australia*, May 20, 1916). Scholars note that the work of the crew at The Australian Photo-Play Company 'often displayed an ingenuity that set them far ahead of their local contemporaries' (Pike and Cooper, 1998, 21).

In effect, Rolfe appears to have been as competent a director as any of his peers, and better than many. His career, as prolific as it was short, produced some of the most applauded Australian films by critics and audiences of the era, both domestically and overseas. The scant body of evidence provided by his surviving corpus supports the judgment that he was an effective director, as understated on screen as he appears to have been in the cinema industry.

Ironically, modern Australian audiences are probably more familiar with a piece of this self-effacing director's work than of any other silent era Australian director. Every Anzac Day, grainy images of Rolfe's landing scenes from *The Hero of the Dardanelles,* filmed at Tamarama Beach, are invariably played on news broadcasts as if they were real shots of the Anzac landings. Underlining both his importance to Australian cinema and his anonymity, Rolfe's work still plays a central role in Australian screen iconography while his name is forgotten by almost everyone.

Alfred Rolfe was an industrious, moderately talented actor who helped Alfred Dampier recover from bankruptcy and public scandal, and had a successful hasty marriage with the boss's daughter that lasted. Rolfe never lacked work in an industry notorious for unemployment, and he enjoyed unexpected success in a new medium, briefly flourishing as director of some of the most popular and significant Australian films of the pre-war silent era. He was ultimately burnt out as a movie maker, but was smart enough to hang on to his money and develop a hobby outside the industry. Rolfe brought entertainment to thousands of theatre

and movie goers, profit to cinema operators and his employers, and helped to popularize Australian film. Even taking into account the debate over the extent of his contribution to certain movies, he was responsible for the production of a number of the most significant films of early silent Australian cinema. It was an admirable career and deserves to be better known.

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Appendix: Select Filmography

Spencer's Pictures

Captain Midnight, the Bush King (9/2/1911)
Captain Starlight (16/3/1911)
The Life of Rufus Dawes (19/6/1911)

Australian Photo-Play Company

Moora Neya, or The Message of the Spear (31/7/ 1911)
By His Excellency's Command, or The Lady Outlaw (28/8/ 1911)
In the Nick of Time (4/9/ 1911)
Mates from the Murrumbidgee (4/9/ 1911)
Way Outback (25/9/ 1911)
What Women Suffer (2/10/ 1911)
Caloola, or the Adventures of a Jackeroo (16/10/ 1911)
The Cup Winner, or Doping the Favourite (7/11/ 1911)
The Miner's Curse (27/11/ 1911)
King of the Coiners (8/1/ 1912)
Do Men Love Women? (11/1/ 1912)
The Sin of a Woman (29/1/ 1912)
The Crime and the Criminal (19/2/ 1912)
Cooee and the Echo (11/3/ 1912)
The Love Tyrant, or Love, the Tyrant (6/4/ 1912)
The Cheat (29/4/ 1912)
Won on the Post (1/6/ 1912)
Whose Was the Hand? (25/6/ 1912)
The Moira, or Mystery of the Bush (9/9/ 1912)

Fraser Film Release and Photographic Company

The Day (11/11/ 1914)
The Sunny South (1/2/ 1915)

Australasian Films

Will They Never Come? (5/4/ 1915)
The Hero of the Dardenelles (7/7/ 1915)
The Loyal Rebel (27/9/ 1915)
How We Beat the Emden (6/12/ 1915)
A Man – That's All (31/1/1916)
Australia – a Nation (1916)

Cupid Camouflaged (31/5/ 1918)
Various industrial films on such matters as gold, timber, coal, wood, rifle manufacturing, and the National Mint.

At least 110 Theatre Credits

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