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Australian Cinema and the War Effort 1914-1918

Despite the Australian Government's move to mobilise all resources for the war effort in the early months of the war, the potential of the cinema, that novel form of entertainment, largely escaped the initial attention of officialdom. But as the war progressed, the Government became more involved in using the cinema industry to aid the war effort, until by the end of the war, it was heavily committed to the purchase, production, and distribution of war documentaries.

By contrast, the efforts of private enterprise followed an almost opposite course. Of the 54 fictional features produced in Australia during the war, eighteen were war films. Two thirds of these were produced within eighteen months of the declaration of war, but as demand for rousingly patriotic features dropped rapidly, so too did production. A number of documentary features were also made, usually with Government support. The exhibition industry screened official war films and newsreels, happily at first, but under some protest as the war progressed.

The first official foray into the cinema concerned war censorship, which began with an almost comic over-reaction. Prompted by a paragraph in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 11 August 1914, which stated that the British government had banned the screening of 'war pictures in any shape or form', the censors ordered over a million feet of imported film footage to be destroyed. Even two Napoleonic War films had battles scenes excised by authorities afraid that scenes of violence could deter support for the war. But on 3 September the New South Wales Under-Secretary informed the Inspector General of Police that 'in the absence of any specific directions from the military authorities regarding the advisability of excluding battle scenes from cinematograph pictures, it does not appear necessary to exercise any special supervision over films in that direction'. (Archives Office of New

South Wales (AONSW) 5/7302 14.49738, 14.49741, 14.49743, 14.49745, and *Lone Hand*, 1 May 1915). Once recovered from the early panic, censorship settled down to more sensible tasks such as concealing troopship movements, cutting images of wounded Anzacs from documentaries, and ensuring that local productions upheld the war effort. The *Federal War Precautions Act*, passed in October 1914, formalised official censorship of communications.

The Government was actively involved in producing some early documentary film, working with the huge combine, Australasian Films, to produce *Australia's Response to the Empire's Call* in 1914. Bert Ive, the official cinematographer, was set tasks of filming convoy departures, German internee camps, and other scenes at the request of the Government, these largely being screened as newsreels. But when it came to dramas, the Government initiated virtually none, and lent troops and ships to commercial producers on condition that it cost the Government nothing. Officialdom did little more than this until 1916, when public enthusiasm for the war was measurably waning.

On the other hand, the cinema industry was naturally keen to cash in on enthusiasm for Australia's first war as a nation. But film-makers of this time were not merely cynical profiteers, making a quick pound on the back of a wave of public sentiment. They themselves often held the same ideals and values as those of society at large. What is more, they tended to see themselves as having a responsibility to support official policies because of their influence on public opinion. Australia's film industry reacted in a similar way to that of America's in 1917, calling the pro-war effort 'a duty and privilege of every member of the motion picture industry', and taking pride in assisting the Government.[1] Of course there was self-interest in such statements. Any non-cooperation with the Government would have drawn retribution, and as Ina Bertrand has shown, sectors of the public felt that it was unpatriotic to waste money on movies at such a time. So the industry tried to reassure the public that it filled 'a valuable role in the national life of today' by providing escape from the horrors of the war.[2]

Film distribution companies began to import war features as soon as they became available, British imports being noted in the newspapers by November 1914.[3] But they did not stop at that. In the same month two Australian-made features were released. *A Long, Long Way to Tipperary* and *The Day* (directed by one of Australia's most capable and innovative early directors, Alfred Rolfe), were both based on popular verse.

From April 1915 film-makers embarked on a year of making topical war dramas, most of which enjoyed outstanding box-office success. Australasian Films was the first to move, volunteering a public show of support for the Government by producing three war dramas in nine months, all directed by Alfred Rolfe. Cynics argued that the combine was merely trying to deflect

criticism of its near monopoly of Australian film distribution and exhibition, and conceal its opposition to local production. Certainly, Australasian produced no more war films, despite its string of early successes.

In a letter to the Minister of Defence, Senator Pearce, on 29 January 1915, Australasian's manager proposed an official recruiting film, in the manner of the English-made film *Wake-up*. The Minister 'at once saw its value for recruiting purposes', and responded positively, directing military establishments to co-operate in the production, but at no expense to the Government.[4] The result was *Will They Never Come?*, a half-hour drama released in April 1915, and an instant and durable success. The story centred around a romance, with the girl attracted to the wounded war hero over his athlete brother who stayed home. It was unapologetic propaganda, with 'realism for its keyword, and enlist for its watchword'.[5]

The tone of Australasian's letters to the Minister of Defence over the making of the film was deferential, if not downright grovelling, the manager insisting that 'I need hardly assure you that anything we can do to forward your objects in a similar direction will be gladly undertaken. In fact, we shall be pleased to place the whole resources of our establishment at your service'. He concluded the letter by saying that despite the high cost of producing the film, 'if the object aimed at be achieved, this is a matter of no consequence' (A A B539 AIF 144/1/274A, letter 144/1/247, 13 May 1915. Letter 144/2/162, 19 July 1915 expresses similar sentiments). Considering that *Will They Never Come?* turned a considerable profit, his patriotic bleating about costs was rather hollow.

Australasian followed this with a full length feature, the equally successful sequel *The Hero of the Dardanelles* (the opening eight minutes survive in the National Film and Sound Archive) in July 1915. Made 'at the suggestion of the Federal authorities',[6] it now starred the athlete of the earlier film demonstrating his courage at the Gallipoli landings, and returning home wounded to win the heart of his girl. *How We Beat the Emden* (December 1915) was also made with the full co-operation of the government and with the participation of the armed forces, and borrowed footage of the wrecked ship from an earlier box-office success, a documentary titled *How We Fought the Emden*.

Another film company produced war dramas that paralleled Australasian's efforts. J. C. Williamson's production *Within Our Gates* (July 1915) was also a film about the Gallipoli landings made with official sanction. Like *The Hero of the Dardanelles* it was openly promoted as a recruiting film, and enjoyed similar critical and commercial success. Both films were praised for their 'realism' and 'truthfulness'. Williamson then released *For Australia*, another Emden film, on the same day as Australasian's release. But the production was very poor, and the film did not do well.

In the first five months of 1916, a further six Australian war features were released. The news of Nurse Cavell's execution stimulated three films in less than three months. The first was *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* (January 1916), a film hastily put together by John Gavin to capitalise on the sensational news. Portraying with outraged moral sensibilities the bestiality of the Germans, the film turned huge business, returning £25,000 on a £450 investment.[7] Its indignant moral tone was not only perfectly suited to the desires of the Government, but was still in tune with popular sentiment. Critics hailed it as an aid to the cause of recruiting.

The other two Cavell films were both productions of W.J. Lincoln, whose timing was unfortunate. He was forced to withdraw *Nurse Cavell* (February 1916) under threat of legal action from Gavin. With some reshooting and editing, Lincoln released it as *La Revanche* (April 1916), a sequel to Cavell's story. He was too late. He had missed the tide of indignation, and fell victim to public apathy due to oversaturation.

Another small film company, Fraser Films, released *Murphy of Anzac* in April 1916, about the now legendary figure of John Simpson. Advertised in the standard manner as a recruiting film, it drew negative comments about its caricatured portrayal of the enemy. The critics complained about 'ridiculous' German villains, although it fared well commercially, particularly in rural areas.[8]

The Joan of Arc of Loos (April 1916, the last half is preserved in the NFSA) was next to be released. Although based on fact, it turned the serious defeat at Loos into a victory, by focussing on the well-publicised heroism of a French girl. While it fared reasonably at the box office, it was attacked by perceptive critics who commented that the caricatured Huns of the story were no longer credible. Of one character, enthusiastic for war, a critic wrote:

> [he] evokes very little admiration . . . There are few soldiers of that type nowadays. War is a much more serious business, entered into with a full realisation of what it means, and the sad, tragic results that must follow as a matter of course. Altogether it is a very 'censored' reproduction of the European conflagration that one gets in this picture. (*Theatre* 1 May 1916)

This response is highly significant, for while Gavin's *Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* was hugely successful in its stereotyping, Australian critics and audiences were quickly becoming less inclined to accept such distorted portrayals and were expecting greater truthfulness in the portrayal of the war. However, they were to be disappointed. The Government, fearful of a decline in war fever, resorted to increasingly desperate portrayals of the war, and forced film-makers and critics to follow suit. The review of *The Joan of Arc of Loos* was the last of its kind. In future, war films generally maintained, and indeed intensified, their portrayal of German villainy. Treacherous spies,

often operating in Australia to make the threat more immediate, became standard fare. Film reviews also ceased to criticise films for their anti-German attitudes, turning rather to flattering praise that was often not matched by box-office success.

For by 1916 many Australians were turning away from unbridled support for the war. The casualty lists emanating from Gallipoli's static front, and the return of maimed soldiers, destroyed romantic notions of warfare. As voluntary enlistments slipped, talk grew of conscription, an issue that was to become increasingly divisive as propaganda grew more strident. In July 1916, Australians were introduced to the horrific losses on the Western Front when the 5th Division attacked at Fromelles, losses which made Gallipoli appear mild by comparison.

The trends of war film-making are seen more clearly in the last of the early war films. The amateurish *If the Huns Came to Melbourne* (May 1916) was a lurid and commercially unsuccessful film which tried to bring the war home to Australians by speculating what would happen if the rapacious Hun got as far as Victoria. It reflected the growing intensity of the pro-conscription campaign, but its hysterical tone and poor production values deterred audiences.

The increasing gap between the attitudes evident in the films, their publicity and reviews, and that of the general public, strongly suggests that film-makers and reviewers were constrained in what they said. All films were vetted before release, and while there are no records of films being changed by the censors, it would be naive to think that official pressure was not at least partly responsible for forcing an industry, dependent on pleasing the public taste, to maintain attitudes increasingly at odds with popular opinion.

After a string of sagging returns at the box office, film producers were re-evaluating their product. Clearly the early part of 1916 was a turning point in the willingness of Australian producers to turn out war features. Unable to make the kind of war films that reflected changing attitudes, and making a loss on ones that passed censorship, they simply turned to other subjects. Having produced twelve war dramas in nineteen months, ten of them in the last eleven months, there was to be a eight month gap before the next war drama appeared, and only a total of six more in the remaining twenty-nine months of the war, of which only two would be profitable.

Over this period, the Government became more involved in the cinema, purchasing, distributing and even making war documentaries in support of a range of war-related activities, such as recruiting and fund-raising. In July 1916, upon request by the Government, Australasian Films released *Australia Prepared*, a documentary similar to the record breaking British film *Britain Prepared*. Showing scenes of Australian soldiers training, munitions

manufacture, and the Navy at sea, it received positive reviews and good box-office returns. Documentaries continued to draw public support after dramas faded from popularity, probably because they were perceived to be more factual. Despite the fact that they were as much propaganda as the feature films, their status as actuality footage increased their credibility – an attitude not confined to the early days of cinema. Politicians began to use the medium as well. New South Wales Premier Holman used Harry Julius cartoons with Anzac themes in his 1916 re-election campaign. Julius had earlier made a very emotive recruiting animation full of 'the villainous, barbarous Hun'.

By late 1916, the Government began the systematic purchase of British war documentaries, and engaged Australasian Films as their distributor. The choice was perhaps obvious, given Australasian's near monopoly of the trade, but the self-interested giant went through the motions of distribution without enthusiasm. One exhibitor protested that the company failed to supply sufficient advertising material for the Official War Films (AA A2479 17/938). More helpful was C. R. Herschell of Pathé Frères, an Australian branch of a French company, who not only made recruiting films at special prices, but went out of his way to facilitate screenings. Perhaps his eagerness was due to fears over his German-sounding name, for one note to officials clarifies his Russian-Jewish origins (AA A2479 17/938; AA MP367 560/2/27).

Also despatched to Europe and Palestine were two official cinematographers, Captains George Wilkins and Frank Hurley, commissioned to take specific footage of Australians in combat. The British had proved reluctant to provide Australia with such film, arguing the need to preserve British unity rather than highlighting the performances of individual Imperial forces, but demand at home led the Government to act independently of War Office wishes. The two captains turned out a string of documentaries about the Australian forces.

Soon the Australian Government had a regular supply of war films, which was required screening at cinemas. Exhibitors seemed happy to co-operate; one could note that they could not afford to do otherwise. A 1916 trade journal reported:

> Mr Frank Waddington, managing director of the J.C. Williamson-Waddington picture theatres, has issued instructions that everything is to be done by the theatre staffs under his control to forward the recruiting movement. With this end in view pictures especially taken by the authorities are being shown daily.[10]

As the supply of war documentaries increased, the Government ran into conflicting priorities for their use. The Director-General of Recruiting, Donald MacKinnon, was anxious to use first runs of the films to boost recruiting. At a time when even sports events could fail (as the Sportsmen's Recruiting

Committee discovered in 1917, when the meagre crowds at a special enlistment football match booed the recruiting speech at the end), films still drew crowds and gained recruits despite war weariness (Australian War Memorial (AWM) 533/3; 533/4; AA MP367 560/2/27). However, Hughes decreed that they should be used for fund-raising, and MacKinnon was forced to accept films after they had been milked of all possible revenue by the Repatriation Fund.

The public apathy towards the war was partly the result of Government excesses during the conscription referendum campaigns, especially the second of November 1917. Hughes had controlled every possible avenue of propaganda, including specially commissioned films, which he compelled theatres to screen. Audiences reacted with hooting and cheering, bringing protests from exhibitors who wished to avoid such a polarising issue for fear of losing patrons.[11] As the pro-conscription campaign grew in hysteria, so too it lost its credibility and the support of many Australians. In turn the growing apathy led the campaigners to increasingly strident propaganda in an attempt to arouse support.

Shortages of film stock affected fictional and documentary film-making at times in 1917. Despite this, two Australian war features were produced in 1917, but both confirmed the death of interest in the subject. The first, in February, tried to repeat the success of *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell*, as Gavin reworked the atrocity formula with another true story, *The Murder of Captain Fryatt*. The film was made with a certain amount of restraint, and met good critical response, but, without being a total loss, it failed to ignite popular enthusiasm. The second film was Franklyn Barrett's *Australia's Peril* (May), a classic piece of pro-conscription hysteria. Even the pre-publicity was hyperbolic in the extreme, and upon its release the praise continued. Despite pushing the official line, the film was a box-office failure; official support could not entice people to pay for what they did not want to see. By contrast, another film-maker had found the popular taste. Beaumont Smith, a rough and hasty director, but an excellent showman, began his series of Hayseeds films in March 1917. With their bush settings and outback characters, they spawned not only sequels but also the imitation Waybacks and Dad-and-Dave films. Audiences were demanding escapist fare, and a return to comedies with Australian settings.

The power of documentaries was to last about a year longer than that of dramas. By mid 1917, two documentaries, *The Battle of the Ancre* and *The AIF in France*, had raised thousands of pounds for the Repatriation Fund (AA MP367 560/2/282). Encouraged, the Government purchased *Sons of the Empire* for a total cost of £2,950. But by March 1918 it had made the paltry return of only £676.1.0 after screenings in the most lucrative centres, Melbourne and Sydney (AA A 2479 17/1234; AA A 2483 B 18/5671). The

documentary was rapidly losing appeal. When Hurley offered Australian victories in *With the Light Horse in Palestine* in July, the Government ordered only one copy (AA A2 18/2829).

1918 was a more productive year for Australian features, with no less than eighteen released, a third of them comedies. Included in the eighteen were four war films. Two of them were private productions (as opposed to productions by commercial film companies), which did not fare well: *His Only Chance*, which was a Red Cross fund-raiser, and *Scars of Love*, an obscure production that died upon release. The other two films, however, were to buck the trends. Beaumont Smith shrewdly released the sensational *Satan in Sydney* in July without censorship clearance. Objections were soon raised against the portrayal of the corruption of Anzacs by German agents, while the Chinese community resented the inference of their association with German spies. Briefly banned, the film gained instant notoriety – and hence became a huge hit. Earlier, in March, *The Enemy Within* (which survives in its entirety in the NFSA) was equally successful while portraying an anti-war group very much like the much reviled IWW. While the film reflected the spy hysteria of the referendum campaigns, it was advertised as 'not a war film' in an effort to appeal to a jaded public. The real reason for the success of the film was its star, the talented athlete Snowy Baker, who put on a dazzling display of stunts. Thus, while both films were related to the war, neither of them were outright war films, and both owed their success to reasons other than being war films. One offered sensational, scandalous scenes with plenty of vice for upright citizens to deplore; the other offered Australia's most famous sporting icon at his athletic best.

The cinema industry was able to demonstrate continuing support for the war in a way that was far less risky than making films. While Australia's 1918 output might have been impressive, it compared poorly with the over 900 American features which were imported that year (AA SP348/2). Register of Applications for screening of films for import. Under block-booking agreements with American producers, Australian exhibitors bought films sight unseen in return for guaranteed supply. Many of these films in 1917-1918 were war films, made by Americans newly at war, with the same naked enthusiasm as earlier Australian efforts. These films came with considerable publicity material, often starred popular actors, and were technically more accomplished than many local efforts, making them more attractive commercial propositions. Thus, without extending themselves beyond fulfilling their contractual obligations, exhibitors could offer pro-war films at very little cost, which could return a profit with even small audiences, while mollifying the Government with demonstrations of exhibitor patriotism.

Thus the cinema industry's contribution to the war effort varied throughout the war. At first it was commercial interest which led the way, providing a

series of films which met popular demand, while satisfying Government desires for help with recruiting. At this stage, the Government needed to do little, as what was being accomplished was fulfilling its needs. As demand for war dramas diminished, Government involvement grew, but only in the area of documentary film, and with growing coercion on all the increasingly reluctant arms of the cinema trade: production, distribution and publicity, and exhibition. The Government used film in an attempt to maintain enthusiasm for the war, to attract recruits, to raise funds for various official causes, and to promote specific Government policies, in particular, conscription. Films were successful in achieving some of these goals – fund-raising and to a lesser extent recruiting; but were conspicuously less successful in other areas.

Endnotes

1. *Green Room*, 1 June, 1917.
2. Bertrand, Ina (1978), *Film Censorship in Australia*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, p. 60, and *Lone Hand*, 1 May 1918.
3. *Sun*, 15 November 1914.
4. *Lone Hand*, 1 October 1915; Australian Archives (AA) B539 AIF 144/1/274A.
5. Reade, Eric (1975), *The Australian Screen: A Pictorial History of Australian Film-making*, Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, p. 70.
6. *Sun*, 11 July 1915.
7. Pike, Andrew, and Cooper, Ross (1980), *Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, p. 79.
8. *Theatre*, 1 June 1916; *Australian Variety*, 7 June 1916.
9. *Theatre*, 1 June 1916.
10. *Sun*, 11 June 1916.
11. Shirley, Graham and Adams, Brian (1989), *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*, revised edition, Sydney: Currency Press, p. 47.