

Religion and the Anzac legend on screen

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In *The Broken Years*, Bill Gammage's ground-breaking study of the letters and diaries of about a thousand AIF soldiers, he reported that there were 'three particular omissions, religion, politics, and sex, and of these perhaps the most surprising is religion.' While noting instances of religious sentiment and devotion, he argued that 'the average Australian soldier was not religious,' dodging compulsory religious services where possible, and 'distrusting' chaplains, except for a handful of exceptional ones, who despite the respect they earned through their actions, 'probably ... advanced the piety of their flock only incidentally.'¹

Gammage is unexceptional in characterising the Anzacs as indifferent to religion. The overwhelming majority of representations of Australians in the Great War in virtually every medium have done so from a firmly secular perspective. This is particularly true of cinematic portrayals of Anzac. Of around 45 representations of the Great War in Australian movies and television dramas, only two offer any kind of examination of the role of religion in the lives of those caught up in the conflict. The bulk of the rest tend to

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the glorification—if not veneration—of the Anzac legend, endowing it with a mythic symbolism that has increasingly resonated with the public, to the point where its memorials, rituals, dogmas and pilgrimages have led it to being labelled by some commentators as Australia's secular faith.²

The significance of the Great War in Australian consciousness was actually anticipated even before it began. At Federation, Alfred Deakin predicted that the spiritual heart of the new Australian nation would not be forged by the political actions of 1901, but rather by a future war.³ This perspective resonated with Australian society. Representations of the Great War began in Australian cinema before Australian forces took part. In November 1914, two feature films told stories that were simple derivatives of British propaganda dramas, with stock characters: the villainous Hun who trampled civilisation into the dirt with every imaginable atrocity; the treacherous spy who sought to betray his country to the German warships cruising off the coast; and the noble, heroic Briton fighting against the odds.⁴ Throughout the war Australian films repeated these clichés, even when portraying Australian subjects, though with decreasing impact as audiences grew less susceptible to such transparent exaggerations over time.

In effect, the films tapped into a widespread belief that the cause of the British Empire represented the cause of God. A populist social Darwinism portrayed British civilisation as the pinnacle of human evolution, and hence the ultimate expression of God's will on earth. The diaries and letters of many AIF men reflect this easy assumption that God and the British Crown were indissolubly united.⁵ In portraying all things British as supreme in the moral and spiritual realms, Australian war cinema tacitly tapped into this belief without having to make it overt. God was never mentioned; references to Britain and the British were all that was necessary to make the point.

To reinforce the union of Australian sentiment with that of Britain, a number of Australian war films during the war did not even have Australian subjects. A trio of films about the stout, businesslike, middle-aged English Nurse Cavell in early 1916 portrayed her as a beautiful, young and saintly martyr to German brutality.⁶ *The Joan of Arc of Loos* (1916) embroidered an incident reported in the press of a French girl who inspired wavering troops at a key moment in the Battle of Loos, with the film's title associating her with the iconic medieval saint.

At the same time, Australian cinema began the process of idealising the Australian soldier. *Will They Never Come*, a short recruiting film in

April 1915, argued that the war could make a real man out of a bookish 'namby-pamby'.⁷ In July 1915, two movies were released within two days, each depicting the Gallipoli landings which had taken place just over two months before. *The Hero of the Dardanelles* (a sequel to *Will They Never Come*) and *Within Our Gates* represented the Australian soldier storming the cliffs at Gallipoli in conventional British terms—namely someone drawn from the urban gentry and fighting man-to-man with the noble bayonet against an enemy who, armed with long-range machine guns and cannon, committed atrocities against the Red Cross, thus making the Anzac out to be the ideal antipodean Briton.⁸ These huge impact at the box office of these films helped build the momentum gathering in the heavily-censored press which was creating a new legend through which a powerful national identity could be articulated. One of the subjects of this propaganda was John Simpson Kirkpatrick, a relatively unknown Gallipoli stretcher-bearer who was posthumously raised to fame to boost support for the war.⁹ He and his donkey were the subject of a movie in 1916, *Murphy of Anzac*, portraying him as a noble martyr for the British cause.¹⁰ The legend of Simpson went on to become a cornerstone and benchmark for the iconic Anzac, and his laying down of his life while rescuing the wounded with a donkey at first evoked, and then superseded, the biblical imagery of both the Good Samaritan and Christ in the Anzac narrative.

Post-war films continued the process of idealising and glorifying the Australian soldier, and it was during the inter-war years that the ideal Anzac shifted in character from a stout upper-class Briton to a lean and laconic Australian bushman.¹¹ That this representation carried spiritual significance is evident in the film *The Spirit of Gallipoli*, made by an earnest young man seeking to motivate an apathetic generation of youth, who portrayed himself in the film as inspired to greater heights of nobility of character through visions of the example of the men at Gallipoli.¹² Another film ennobled the Australian soldier: influential director Charles Chauvel produced *Forty Thousand Horsemen*, a tribute to his uncle's Light Horsemen of the Palestine campaign.¹³ The film included references to the biblical significance of Palestine, but sought to represent the Light Horsemen as the latest manifestation of those great armies which had liberated the Holy Land from the Mohammedans, as they were then called, thus investing the Australian with the spiritual mantle of those who had gone before, such as the Crusaders and Napoleon.

But the most effective cinematic effort in spiritualising Anzac has been Peter Weir's powerful *Gallipoli*.¹⁴ This elegiac film invested the Anzac with potent mythic significance at a time when jingoistic fervour was high and Australia was being defined in opposition to its English origins. The depiction of the pure and innocent Archie as the sacrificial lamb slaughtered on the altar of British stupidity at the climax of the film, over the haunting music of *Adagio in G minor*, is one of the most powerfully spiritual moments in Australian cinema, earning the film plaudits as perhaps *the* Australian film of all time.¹⁵ It is difficult to underestimate its impact on Australian audiences since its release, and it is almost certainly the most widely-disseminated text on the Anzac legend, and hence probably the most influential.¹⁶

The television mini-series *Anzacs* was the other great popular shaper of Anzac attitudes in the 1980s.¹⁷ Its light-hearted soap-opera style differed greatly from the sombre gravitas of *Gallipoli*, but it also remains widely distributed and praised as a text on the Anzac story, and remains influential in shaping the contemporary Australian view of Anzac, including the idealisation of the Australian soldier as a paragon of the supposedly singular Australian virtues of practicality, irreverence, resourcefulness, independence and mateship, all gloriously thrown into sharp relief by British incompetence, lack of imagination, and snobbery. Other productions of the 1980s conformed to these norms, picturing the Anzac as the epitome of Australian virtue.¹⁸

So powerful were these representations, that for the next twenty years, no major screen representations of Anzac emerged, and when they did, they won only modest audience patronage. *Beneath Hill 60* and the recent mini-series *Gallipoli* have won some critical praise but attracted disappointing audience ratings.¹⁹ Yet not every screen representation of Anzac has glorified the legend. Several productions of the 1980s, as well as recent ones, have attempted to give feet of clay to the golden idol of the Anzac. Mini-series such as *1915*, *A Fortunate Life*, *Always Afternoon*, *The Alien Years*, *Gallipoli* and the tele-feature *An Accidental Soldier* offered more nuanced and less idealised representations, while *The Private War of Lucinda Smith* actually held the Anzac legend up to ridicule.²⁰ None was able to subvert the hegemony of the dominant Anzac narrative which was drummed into Australians through pervasive representations in the media, education, government and advocacy organisations such as the RSL. In many cases even critical reviewers missed the subversive qualities of these productions and denigrated them as further evidence of the monosemic idealisation of

Anzac.²¹ Their mostly modest ratings indicated that the Australian public was equally unmoved to revise their stereotypical conceptions of Anzac, though some failed for cinematic as much as ideological reasons.

Anzacs on screen therefore form part of the wider national dialogue representing the Anzac legend as the true home of the Australian spirit. Yet there have been passing references to the more conventional forms of spirituality—the Christian church, its practices and its clergy. Occasionally one gains a glimpse of a chaplain in various productions, perhaps listening in amusement as a good-natured larrikin defends himself before the colonel from the charges laid against him by a pompous British sergeant (*Diggers*, 1931), or conducting battlefield funerals in the background as the lead characters pass by (*Anzacs*, 1985). On other occasions, one hears a prayer being recited or sees the sign of the cross performed by a soldier waiting to go over the top in another (probably doomed) charge, implying the impotence of religion to deal with the harsh realities of war (*Gallipoli*, 1981). Russell Crowe's *The Water Diviner* also takes passing shots at organised religion (Roman Catholic in this case) with nothing positive to say about it, instead substituting his character's mystical powers in a quest to find his missing sons, and an unconvincing romance, as the film's spiritual centre.²² In such cases, organised religion and personal beliefs form a small part of the larger tapestry of the production, intended to create an impression of authenticity, much like ensuring that uniforms are correct for the period. It is therefore revealing that these snatches of religion are shown, suggesting that producers know that religion was present, and even meaningful, but are constrained by the strictly secular nature of the Anzac legend, which forbids any real exploration of the theme.

Only two Anzac productions grant any significant screen time to the discussion of religion in the Great War. One of them is the miniseries *Anzacs*, which takes the time to develop the character of a pacifist Anglican clergyman in rural Victoria, boldly declaring the incompatibility of the war with the Sermon on the Mount, and suffering the persecution of society and church for his principled stand. In an otherwise clichéd production, the portrayal of the Reverend George Lonsdale is something of a standout, as it represents an exception among the mainstream Australian clergy of the time. While it allows Lonsdale to articulate the fashionable anti-war sentiments of Australian audiences of the 1980s, he always does so from a biblical perspective. It is notable for its double rarity: a pacifist Anglican

clergyman, and the positive representation of a religious point of view. Of course the irony is that Lonsdale's perspective is in contradiction to that taken by the Church of England and most of the other Protestant denominations at the time. In giving voice to a Christian pacifist perspective, the mini-series simultaneously condemned institutional religion for its hypocritical support for the war. But in a ham-fisted speech, Lonsdale pontificates on the mateship that ties the men at the front together, suggesting that mateship has replaced the bonds of Christian fellowship as the force behind Australian military prowess, thus passing on the spiritual baton from the Church to a secular social value.

The other production that offers extended religious commentary is the mini-series *Gallipoli*. Its main character, 'Tolly' Johnson, is represented as a peace-time church attender, along with his mother and older brother, who also becomes an Anzac. From time to time the characters in the story discuss religious and spiritual issues. Unfortunately, the production gradually pulls these discussions into conformity with the general expectation that the Anzacs were not religious. As the series progresses, the attitude to religion and its beliefs, especially concerning the afterlife, becomes increasingly negative, as soldiers exhibit growing disillusionment with the Christian faith. The program goes so far as to depict a Catholic chaplain who point-blank refuses to conduct a funeral for an atheistic soldier, forcing the men to conduct their own secular memorial service around his grave, complete with a patriotic bush song as the emotional hymn. One gains the impression that the chaplain was not merely religiously intolerant but also lazy and perhaps lacking in courage to conduct a funeral under fire.

This representation is disappointing, particularly as the track record of chaplains on Gallipoli is on the whole very positive. Numerous diaries attest to the good work of chaplains at Gallipoli, and their fearlessness in dealing with the dead and wounded was a byword. Chaplains willingly buried men of every faith and none on Gallipoli, and such religious discrimination around the graveside would have been a breach of duty so serious as to merit the greatest censure. Nothing approaching this incident has been encountered by this writer in reading the diaries and letters of hundreds of Gallipoli soldiers. More specifically, to single out a Roman Catholic chaplain behaving that way is unfortunate, as they generally enjoyed great respect on Gallipoli. Chaplains such as Fathers Fahey, McAuliffe, Murphy, and Bergin enjoyed immense respect for their work. Naturally, portraying a Catholic chaplain is

convenient shorthand for the cinema, as perhaps the most instantly visually recognisable and iconic of the major Western Christian denominations, but there was surely no need to blacken the reputation of the real chaplains who performed with courage and distinction.

But there is additional sadness in the religious representations of the mini-series. While the battalion of the soldiers is unnamed, the shoulder colour-patch shows that it is the 4th Battalion, whose chaplain, William 'Fighting Mac' McKenzie, was a legend among the men at Gallipoli and France. Indeed he remained a legend with soldiers and their families for the rest of his life. An articulate soldier-diarist considered him to be one of the two outstanding personalities at Gallipoli, alongside no less a figure than the popular British general commanding the AIF, William Birdwood.²³ A larger-than-life figure such as McKenzie is tailor-made for the screen, but even an allusion to him is totally absent in the mini-series. Ignorance cannot be a factor in his omission, for any research into the 4th Battalion would have revealed his influence: no other soldier is as frequently referred to in the battalion history.²⁴

While one can be grateful for the breakthrough that religion featured as much as it did in *Gallipoli*, in the end the portrayal of soldier faith merely reinforces popular perceptions of the irreligious character of the Anzacs, and the irrelevance of religion to them. Yet this consistent denigration, or total absence, of religion in Anzac cinema is at odds with research showing that the Anzacs were far from indifferent. The first study of Australian chaplains suggested that their work was appreciated.²⁵ The new official history of the Australian chaplaincy corps demonstrates that religious sentiment was more widespread than previously suspected, and that chaplains were often influential and respected.²⁶ A biography of legendary chaplain William McKenzie draws similar conclusions.²⁷ This author's own current research includes the reading of the letters and diaries of about a thousand soldiers—the same sample size as Gammage's study. Of those, more than a third write of religion, the vast majority of them favourably. While this author does not contest Gammage's conclusion that the bulk of the Anzacs were nominal Christians generally uninterested in religion, the sheer frequency of religious commentary in the writings of Anzac soldiers indicates that its presence, impact and relevance may have been seriously underrated in both academic literature and popular imaginations. Indeed, comparisons with religious statements in British and American war diaries make for

a most favourable comparison: Australians appear to be just as religious as their Anglo-American cousins. Ironically, Gammage's claim that the Anzacs may prove to be no different to soldiers of other nations is true in this instance—only that the Anzacs were in all probability more religious than he gave credit for.²⁸

In the centenary year of the Anzac landings, the representation of Anzac remains a burning issue for the Australian people. Many facets of the Anzac legend have been updated to reflect changing attitudes and values. The Anzac is no longer represented in cinema or print as an aristocratic English-type city boy who would make good officer material. Now he is consistently shown as being anti-British and possessing of all the archetypal qualities of the Australian bushman. While some of the more clichéd qualities of Anzac are increasingly nuanced in Australian cinema, at least one element remains firmly entrenched in both cinematic and popular prejudice: the Anzac is always hostile to active religion. Sadly (and ahistorically), the fact that a large minority of Anzacs engaged with religion and faith remains outside of the cinema portrayal of Anzac.

Endnotes

1. Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1974, p. xv.
2. Graham Seal, 'ANZAC: the sacred in the secular', in Dawn Bennett (ed.), *Open to Interpretation*, Network Books, Perth, 2007, pp. 135–44. See also KS Inglis, *Sacred Places: War memorials in the Australian landscape*, 3rd revised edn, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008.
3. David Day, *Claiming a Continent: A history of Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1996, p. 206.
4. Daniel Reynaud, *Celluloid Anzacs: The Great War through Australian Cinema*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2007, p. 15.
5. Michael Gladwin, *Captains of the Soul: A history of Australian Army chaplains*, Big Sky, Newport, NSW, 2013, p. 79.
6. *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell (Edith Cavell)*, Producer: Australian Famous Feature Company. Director: John Gavin, C Post Mason. Screenplay: Agnes Gavin, 1916; *Nurse Cavell*, Producer/Director/Screenplay: WJ

- Lincoln, 1916; *La Revanche*, Producer/Director: WJ Lincoln. Screenplay: WJ Lincoln, Fred Kehoe, 1916.
7. *Will They Never Come*, Producer: Australasian Films. Director: Alfred Rolfe. Screenplay: Phillip Gell, Loris Browne, 1915; Reynaud, *Celluloid Anzacs*, pp. 18–19.
 8. *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, Producer: Australasian Films. Director: Alfred Rolfe. Screenplay: Phillip Gell, Loris Browne, 1915; *Within Our Gates (Deeds that Won Gallipoli)*, Producer: JC Williamson. Director: Frank Harvey. Screenplay: WJ Lincoln, 1915.
 9. Peter Cochrane, *Simpson and the Donkey: the Making of a Legend*, MUP, Melbourne, 1992; Graham Wilson, *Dust, Donkeys and Delusions: the myth of Simpson and his donkey exposed*, Big Sky, Newport NSW, 2012.
 10. *Murphy of Anzac*, Producer: Fraser Film Company. Director: JE Mathews, 1916
 11. See, for example, *Ginger Mick*, Producer/Director/Screenplay: Raymond Longford, 1920; *Fellers*, Producer: Artaus Productions. Director: Arthur Higgins, Austin Fay. Screenplay: Ashley Durham, 1930; *Diggers*, Producer/Director: FW Thring. Screenplay: Pat Hanna, Eric Donaldson, 1930.
 12. *The Spirit of Gallipoli*, Producer: Federal Films. Director: Keith Gategood, William Green. Screenplay: Hal Carlton, 1928.
 13. *Forty Thousand Horsemen*, Producer/Director: Charles Chauvel. Screenplay: Charles Chauvel, Elsa Chauvel, 1940.
 14. *Gallipoli*, Producer: Robert Stigwood, Patricia Lovell. Director: Peter Weir. Screenplay: David Williamson, 1981.
 15. David Stratton, *The Avocado Plantation: Boom and Bust in the Australian Film Industry*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1990, p. 22.
 16. Daniel Reynaud, 'National Versions of the Great War: Modern Australian Anzac Cinema', in Martin Löschnigg and Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż (eds), *The Great War in Post-Memory Literature and Film*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin & Boston, 2014, p. 293.
 17. *Anzacs*, Producer: Geoff Burrows. Director: John Dixon, George Miller, Pino Amenta. Screenplay: John Dixon, John Clarke, James Mitchell, 1985.
 18. Reynaud, 'National Versions of the Great War', p. 294.
 19. *Beneath Hill 60*, Producer: Bill Leimbach, David Roach. Director: Jeremy Sims. Screen play: David Roach, 2010; *Gallipoli*, Director: Glensyn Ivin. Producer: John Edwards, Robert Connolly. Screenplay: Christopher Lee, 2015.

20. *1915*, Producer: Ray Alchin. Director: Chris Thomson, Di Drew. Screenplay: Peter Yeldham, 1982; *A Fortunate Life*, Producer: Bill Hughes. Director: Marcus Cole, Henri Safran. Screenplay: Ken Kelso, 1986; *Always Afternoon*, Producer: Henry Crawford. Director/Screenplay: David Stevens, 1988; *The Alien Years*, Producer: Ray Alchin. Director: Donald Crombie. Screenplay: Peter Yeldham, 1988; *An Accidental Soldier*, Producer: David Ogilvy, Greg Waters, Ben Grant, Sue Taylor, Kylie du Fresne, Susie Campbell. Director: Rachel Ward. Screenplay: Blake Ayshford, 2013; *The Private War of Lucinda Smith*, Producer: Geoffrey Daniels, Ray Alchin. Director: Ray Alchin. Screenplay: Peter Yeldham, 1990.
21. Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: living with the legend*, OUP, Melbourne, 1994, p. 196; Joan Beaumont, 'Introduction,' in Joan Beaumont (ed.), *Australia's War, 1914–18*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995, xix.
22. *The Water Diviner*, Producer: Andrew Mason, Keith Rodger, Troy Lum; Director: Russell Crowe; Screenplay: Andrew Knight, Andrew Anastasios, 2014.
23. Daniel Reynaud, *The Man the Anzacs Revered: William 'Fighting Mac' McKenzie, Anzac Chaplain*. Signs Publishing, Warburton, 2015, p. 234.
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25. Michael McKernan, *Padre: Australian Chaplains in Gallipoli and France*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986.
26. Gladwin, *Captains of the Soul*, ch. 3.
27. Reynaud, *The Man the Anzacs Revered*.
28. Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*, Praeger, Westport CT & London, 2003, p. 117; Gammage, *The Broken Years*, xv–xvi.