

The Water Diviner: Russell Crowe's contribution to the WWI centenary

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Directed by Russell Crowe from a screenplay by Andrew Knight and Andrew Anastasios

Well-known actor and first-time director Russell Crowe's *The Water Diviner* is an implausible melodrama about Joshua Connor (Crowe), an Australian farmer, attempting to locate his three sons in post-World War I Turkey. The young men were reported killed during the Allied invasion of the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915.

Released in late December, the movie—a mixture of Gallipoli battle scene flash-backs, combined with a clichéd post-war romance and an Indiana Jones-style adventure—quickly became the highest-grossing Australian film for 2014. Last week it won the Australia Academy Cinema Television Arts best film prize.

The Water Diviner's commercial success is due in no small part to the Australian government's promotion of the WWI centenary and the Gallipoli incursion in particular.

Beginning last year, millions of Australians have been bombarded with the government's multi-million dollar war centenary campaign to glorify militarism and promote, particularly amongst young people, the necessity for "national sacrifice." Various war centenary related films, television programs, plays and other cultural events are being produced in line with this campaign. Crowe's 111-minute film is just one in a barrage of Anzac-related films to be screened this year with at least six television shows, including *Gallipoli*, *Gallipoli Deadline*, *The First ANZACs*, *The Waler: Australia's Great Warhorse*, *The Waves of Anzac Cove* and *Gallipoli: The Power of Ten*.

The Water Diviner begins at Gallipoli in late 1915, as Turkish troops advance on abandoned Australian frontlines. The movie flashes back to pre-WWI at Joshua Connor's farm in north-western Victoria and then the departure of his sons to join the Australian military after the war had broken out.

Four years later Connor and his wife Eliza are grieving over the sons' reported deaths at Gallipoli. Eliza dies tragically and Joshua, who has a mystical talent for "divining" (identifying) underground water sources, travels to Turkey to try and find their bodies. On arrival, he is told by the occupying British military authorities that he cannot visit the battlefield. Encouraged by Ayshe (Olga Kurylenko), a beautiful Turkish war widow and the story's obvious romantic element, he travels to Gallipoli where he miraculously "divines" two of his sons' bodies.

Connor is befriended by two Turkish military officers—Major Hasan (Yilmaz Erdogan) and Sergeant Cemal (Cem Yılmaz)—who had been involved in the Gallipoli conflict. One of them discovers that the Australian farmer's oldest son Arthur (Ryan Corr) was taken prisoner and could still be alive somewhere in southern Anatolia.

Connor, whom the Turkish soldiers call "Mr Anzac"—the acronym

for Australian and New Zealand Corp troops—teams up with Hasan, Cemal and others attracted to Mustafa Kemal's nationalist movement.

The film degenerates into an absurd adventure as the Australian farmer, using his special intuitive powers, searches for his son. Along the way he teaches the Turks how to play cricket. The movie ends on an upbeat and romantic note.

Crowe has appeared in many forgettable blockbusters during his 25-year career, but when provided with a good script and strong direction he is capable of serious and compelling performances. His Oscar-nominated role as Jeffrey Wigand, the tobacco-company whistle blower, in director Michael Mann's *The Insider* (1999) immediately comes to mind.

The Water Diviner, however, has none of *The Insider*'s dramatic tension or emotional depth. On the contrary, the movie is a glib, glossy and unconvincing work with obvious plot contrivances, no real character development and a number of historical errors.

Five years ago scriptwriter Andrew Anastasios, who was looking for a "different way" to tell the Gallipoli story, discovered a footnote in war correspondent C.E.W. Bean's 400-page *Gallipoli Mission* (1948). The note included a two-sentence reference to an unnamed Australian father who had travelled to Turkey one year after the war looking for his son's grave.

Unable to find any other details about the father, Anastasios and veteran Australian film and television producer and scriptwriter Andrew Knight decided to invent the movie's far-fetched tale and pitched it to Crowe.

The end result, which was substantially funded by multi-billionaires Kerry Stokes and James Packer, is a highly-selective piece of historical fiction that "doffs the cap" to the horrors of war but bolsters the officially-sanctioned histories of the Gallipoli intervention and post-war Turkey.

Because *The Water Diviner* fails to provide even the most rudimentary background information about the events it is set against, a few basic historical facts are in order.

The Gallipoli campaign, which was devised by Winston Churchill and the British high command, began in April 1915. It aimed to knock Germany's Turkish allies out of the imperialist war, establish supply lines to Tsarist Russia and open a new war front against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This action, it was hoped, would also create the conditions for Britain and France to seize control of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire.

While the Gallipoli invasion was a bloody military defeat—more than 50,000 Allied troops were killed, including 8,000 Australians and, 2,700 New Zealanders—the Australian bourgeoisie, then and now, hail it as the "birth of the nation." The April 25 anniversary of the 1915

military campaign is a national holiday.

Turkey's ruling elite presents the Allied defeat, and key military commander Mustafa Kemal's role in repulsing the invaders, as a defining moment in that nation's history. Over 70,000 Turkish defenders were killed in the nine-month conflict.

Kemal later emerged as the leader of the Turkish National Movement in its bitter struggle against the post-war British and French occupation of Istanbul, then known as Constantinople, and the Greek military, which had seized parts of western Anatolia. Kemal, later renamed Atatürk (Father of Turkey), was the central figure in the post-war conflict and in the establishment of Turkey as a secular nation. He held the presidency from 1923 until his death in 1938.

The night before the April 25, 1915 Allied landing at Gallipoli, the Ottoman regime in Istanbul rounded up and later executed hundreds of Armenian intellectuals, religious and political leaders. Viewed as likely collaborators with Tsarist Russia, it reflected a deepening crisis of the regime that was exacerbated by the Allied invasion. What followed was a systematic repression aimed at driving the Armenian population out of its historic homelands in Ottoman Turkey. Over one million Armenians are believed to have died during the genocidal operation.

While *The Water Diviner* reveals something of the military brutality at Gallipoli and sympathetically portrays the Turkish defenders, some reviewers have insisted that the movie is a condemnation of war. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, claimed it had a "powerful anti-war message."

It did not. Numerous movies have exposed the horrible reality of war, but to be classified as "anti-war," some understanding of the driving forces behind the barbarity must be provided, or, at the very least, an attempt to stimulate audiences to investigate such issues.

Crowe's film fails completely on this score. Instead, it presents war as a terrible but unfathomable result of human nature, while insisting that humanity must have faith that somehow everything will turn out for the best. "Hope is a necessity where I'm from," Joshua Connor reassuringly declares.

The Water Diviner shamelessly covers up the reasons for Australia's involvement in the 1914–18 war—a global conflict for colonies, raw materials and geo-political advantage. The massacre of tens of thousands of young men at Gallipoli is never depicted as a political crime, one of many perpetrated during the four-year imperialist slaughter.

At one point in the film, Sergeant Cemal declares that the Turks are defending their own country and that all war is about land. "What were you fighting for?" he asks Connor. Australians didn't need land, the farmer replies, but were fighting for "a principle" and the film moves on.

The Water Diviner cannot explain what this so-called principle is, because to do so would puncture Australia's official mythology—then and now—that the Anzac troops were defending "democracy" and "freedom." Land, in fact, was a key factor in the Australian government's decision to join Britain's war effort.

As soon as Britain declared war it moved to seize German East Africa, German South-West Africa, Togoland and the Cameroons. At the same time, Australia and New Zealand were given the green light to take Germany's South Pacific colonies—New Guinea, Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Nauru and Samoa—which they had coveted for many years. By 1922, the British Empire controlled almost a quarter of the world's territory and a fifth of the world's population.

The Water Diviner also carefully omits anything that might

antagonise the Turkish government, in particular the Armenian genocide. It remains a crime under article 301 of the Turkish constitution to publicly acknowledge the genocide. The movie makes no mention of the Armenians or their fate, a significant absence given that Connor's son Arthur was being held prisoner in an area that previously had a large Armenian population. This was no doubt a calculated decision to ensure Turkish backing and distribution of the film in that country.

All the characters in *The Water Diviner*, including Joshua Connor, are nationalist stereotypes. The British officers are pompous and arrogant while the forces of the Greek military are portrayed as cruel and marauding bandits—"Satan's army," says one of the film's characters. Likewise, Connor and some of the Turkish characters refer to the Germans with contempt.

Connor himself contains traces of the iconic bushman-rural worker national stereotype promoted in Australian literature in the late 19th and early 20th century, but with a "progressive" modern makeover and semi-mystical powers.

The Australian farmer's culturally inclusive persona, his rapid embrace of the film's tourist version of Turkish culture and his romance with Ayshe have been carefully tailored for contemporary audiences.

The Water Diviner, moreover, ignores the terrible, decades-long physical and psychological impact of the Gallipoli campaign on the soldiers who survived and their families.

Unsurprisingly, *The Water Diviner* recently received effusive praise from the Australian War Memorial. Located in Canberra, the national capital, the multi-million dollar establishment is dedicated to glorifying the Australian military. Schools are given generous subsidies by the federal government if they organise student excursions to the institution.

Writing last month on the War Memorial's Facebook page, the museum's Education Manager Stuart Baines claimed that the movie was "highly entertaining with a big fresh dose of reality thrown in" and encouraged teachers and students to watch it.

Baines's remit is to "connect students and teachers Australia-wide with classroom tools and curriculum-based resources"—in other words, to promote militarism and war amongst the young. That *The Water Diviner* is being promoted in such quarters says much about its character and content.

The author also recommends:

A valuable and compelling antiwar film

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