

### 3. SACRED MYTHS

‘Gallipoli has been important in my family ... I have always felt this and I know my sons feel it.’

*Rupert Murdoch*<sup>1</sup>

Sydney, 7 August 1981. Flashguns strobed as Rupert Murdoch led his mother up the red and purple carpet for the black-tie premiere of his first feature film as producer: *Gallipoli*. The date had been chosen for the sharpest possible significance: Rupert’s *Weekend Australian* stressed in its front-page coverage of the premiere that it was ‘exactly 66 years after the bloody struggle’, the Battle of the Nek, recreated as the final scene of the movie.<sup>2</sup> Although Rupert’s father did not feature in the film, the newspaper photograph showed Keith staring out, serious but dashing in officer’s uniform as a war correspondent, above the beaming smiles of a young Mel Gibson and his co-star Mark Lee. The legend next to the photograph pointed to the ‘Gallipoli letter that stunned Australia’, reprinted in its 8000-word entirety in the magazine section.<sup>3</sup> Following this lavishly illustrated spread came two glowing film reviews.<sup>4</sup> This was the first, and – as it transpired – the only production from Associated R & R Films.<sup>5</sup> Rupert had been sure of success from the first moment he read the script: ‘It’s going to be great. It’s murder, history, war ... We can’t lose.’<sup>6</sup>

The film’s plot delivered a three-act tragedy. In outback Australia two young athletes answer the recruitment call drilled into them by the press and Kipling’s tales. Training in Egypt, they bond over

larrikin anti-English japes and the sowing of their wild oats. Finally at the hellish warzone, they are sacrificed by incompetent colonial commanders in a diversionary action while the British are ‘just sitting on the beach drinking cups of tea’.<sup>7</sup>

One otherwise glowing review from outside the Murdoch stable conceded that those ‘who resent emotional manipulation will be affronted by this film’.<sup>8</sup> The charge of propaganda<sup>9</sup> was not only levelled at the film; it has been levelled against Keith’s famous ‘Gallipoli letter’ of a generation before. It is the letter that made his career, and has been woven into an untouchable myth. It’s a myth that Rupert has deployed to deflect criticism of the sharper edges of his own career<sup>10</sup> – a myth that has overshadowed Keith’s darker legacy.

In 1915 colonial lines of communication and control, centred in London, meant that even Australia’s prime minister and its minister for defence had been kept in the dark about the movements of the AIF; they were not informed of the plan to land at Gallipoli until after the event. However as the weeks went by they feared the worst. The blunt facts of high casualty rates for little or no apparent gain flew in the face of the upbeat official and heavily censored press reports. Fisher and Pearce wanted an inside account of the campaign’s management and a realistic assessment of its prospects. Keith saw his chance to oblige and suggested that he could do so under the guise of investigating mail arrangements and provisions for the wounded in Egypt.

Pearce agreed. Following the announcement of the unusual commission he told questioning senators that despite the rumours Murdoch had not accepted a role in London ‘with the Defence Department’. He was undertaking his inquiries in Egypt while remaining a civilian. After all, a reporter was ‘just about the best man’ who could be assigned such a task. Senators joshed in response: ‘Sometimes they ferret out things you do not want them to know’ and ‘frequently they ferret out things which never happened at all!’ Pearce good-humouredly agreed before observing that reporters also ‘sometimes exercise a very lively imagination’.<sup>11</sup>

The letters of introduction Keith took with him this time were not scratchy and perfunctory, favours pulled in from family connections.

They were acknowledgments of his position and indicators of the possibilities their authors saw for his ability to act for them. Most crucially Pearce gave Keith a letter that introduced him to Sir Ian Hamilton, the British commander of the Dardanelles campaign.<sup>12</sup> Fisher also wrote to David Lloyd George, the ambitious, recently appointed minister for munitions,<sup>13</sup> stressing that Keith was now the representative of ‘a very influential cable service for several important newspapers in Australia’.<sup>14</sup> Lloyd George was vocal in his support for a greater push to war organisation in Britain. Although he had originally supported the strategy of opening up a second front against the Ottoman Empire – championed by Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty – he was now one of the coterie already plotting its abandonment.

Arriving in Cairo in mid August Keith investigated the mail arrangements and hospital conditions for the Australian wounded recuperating there. A copy of the *Sunday Sun*, which contained the launch publicity for *A Hero of the Dardanelles*, was put to good use as the centrepiece of an inspiring photograph of the men on their ward, sent back to Sydney on the next ship south.<sup>15</sup> However Keith soon wrote to Hamilton, enclosing Pearce’s letter and requesting permission to visit the Anzac force on the Gallipoli peninsula. He stressed he would be going across ‘in only a semi-official capacity, so that [he] may record censored impressions in the London and Australian newspapers’ he represented.

Keith also emphasised (in a line that would become infamous given his subsequent actions) that ‘any conditions you impose I should of course, faithfully observe’. To this he added a few more obsequious lines of praise and the passionate plea: ‘May I say that my anxiety as an Australian to visit the sacred shores of Gallipoli while our army is there is intense’.<sup>16</sup> Hamilton hesitated to let him go but was persuaded by his insistence that he would accept military censorship.<sup>17</sup> In his diary a month after their meeting, when the first rumblings of Murdoch’s actions reached him, Hamilton wrote: ‘All I remember of his visit to me here is a sensible, well-spoken man with dark eyes, who said his mind was a blank about soldiers and soldiering’; he had entered into ‘an elaborate explanation of why his duty to Australia could be better done with a pen than a rifle’.<sup>18</sup>

Keith landed at Gallipoli on 3 September 1915. Morale was desperately low following the disastrous August offensive that included the battle of the Nek. Keith spent the next three and a half days walking 'many miles through the trenches', speaking with soldiers and whatever senior and junior officers he could find.<sup>19</sup> Hamilton would later snipe that Keith had spent one week at the press correspondents' camp on the Island of Imbros and only a few days at Anzac Cove and Suvla.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever were the actual days or hours spent with the soldiers, it was Keith's meeting with Ashmead-Bartlett at the press camp on Imbros that most informed the terms of his subsequent actions. The British correspondent was a flamboyant and volatile personality. He had initially supported the British strategy but had recently been hauled over the coals by the War Office for spreading disillusion and boasting of his machinations to remove Hamilton from command.<sup>21</sup> (Ashmead-Bartlett, as a perennial bankrupt always in need of a moneymaking opportunity, had a £5 bet riding on this happening before the end of September.<sup>22</sup>) In the version of events agreed by the pair,<sup>23</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett said that Keith, feeling his own word would not 'carry sufficient weight with the authorities', had begged him to write a letter 'telling the plain truth' about the campaign. ('I have coached him on all essential points, but he says he wants something definite under my own signature.') Keith would then carry the letter secretly back to London, so evading the censorship restrictions.<sup>24</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett went straight to the top, addressing his letter to the British prime minister Herbert Asquith. It detailed the 'true state of affairs out here', the incompetence of the command, the collapse in the morale of the troops and the dire prospect of the winter conditions to come.<sup>25</sup>

Following Keith's departure Hamilton, having got wind of the plot, managed to cable ahead so that at Marseilles the sealed envelope was seized from him by military police.<sup>26</sup> Even though Ashmead-Bartlett's letter did not make it to Downing Street, Keith had absorbed the pessimistic outlook and bitter criticisms of this 'most ghastly and costly fiasco': of the appalling waste of life, of 'muddles and mismanagement', 'the absolute lack of confidence in all ranks in the Headquarters staff', and how the 'splendid Colonial Corps' had been 'almost wiped out.'<sup>27</sup>

Combining Ashmead-Bartlett's views with his own brief observations, Keith decided to compose his own letter, to his own prime minister.

Having arrived in London from Gallipoli with information about what was happening there, Keith was in demand. With barely a chance to settle in at the United Cable Service office housed in the *Times* building, he was whisked off for lunch with the newspaper's powerful editor Geoffrey Dawson. It was later claimed that Northcliffe, hearing that an Australian journalist was on his way to London from the Dardanelles, said, 'He may prove to be the lever we want.'<sup>28</sup> In line with the anti-second-front strategy views of its proprietor, the *Times* sought to expose the true course of the campaign and refocus energies on fighting the Western Front.<sup>29</sup> Dawson was 'moved by the sincerity and vividness' of the 'word pictures' Keith painted of organisational debacles and dire conditions.<sup>30</sup> In a flurry of letters and meetings, the cogs started to bite. Keith retold his story to Sir Edward Carson, chairman of the British Cabinet's Dardanelles committee.

Recording the details of a secret meeting that took place on the following day, Baron Murray of Elibank tried to disguise the names of those who had been there. The report's recipient 'Mr H', it has been speculated, was the Conservative leader and secretary of state for the colonies in Asquith's coalition government, Andrew Bonar Law.<sup>31</sup>

Today, Lord — , Mr A, and Mr B, lunched with me. Mr B is an Australian of high standing and influence who has been despatched by the Australian Government to report to them on the condition of affairs in the Dardanelles. ... Mr B who is rather inarticulate owing to a stammer in his speech, apparently did not convey to Sir — the gravity of the situation, and therefore Lord — was very anxious that Mr A, whom he regards as a man of action, should hear the full story. Mr B is making a confidential report to his government, but we persuaded him to see Lord Kitchener and likewise to give a copy of his report in advance to the Prime Minister and Mr A in order that it might be communicated to the Cabinet.<sup>32</sup>

Substituting the *Times* proprietor Lord Northcliffe for 'Lord —',<sup>33</sup> the Dardanelles committee chairman Sir Edward Carson for 'Sir —' and

the then minister of munitions David Lloyd George for 'Mr A' offers the most likely reading. Lloyd George was certainly keen to bring Law on board, writing to him the following day.<sup>34</sup> Keith later said that the 'most pregnant interviews' he had at this time 'were with Mr Lloyd George and Mr Bonar Law'.<sup>35</sup> So, as he dictated his letter to Fisher Keith was able to incorporate the reactions and confidential views of ambitious Cabinet ministers.<sup>36</sup>

Keith was embarking on a fine balancing act. He wanted to account for a complete military failure while upholding the reputation of the Australian troops in their first engagement as a force, apportioning the blame solely to the British commanders. By extolling the virtues of the Australian soldiers in a letter that, though nominally to the Australian PM, would be read by the most influential and powerful figures in the British government, he sought to promote the standing of his countrymen (and by association, his own standing).

He began his letter with the words: 'I shall talk as if you were by my side' and over the twenty-five typed pages that followed, his language became increasingly emotional. Complicated issues were dramatically over-simplified by the 'very lively imagination' Pearce had feared. 'Australians now loathe and detest any Englishman wearing red', he wrote; the 'countless high officers and conceited young cubs' were 'plainly only playing at War'; and sedition was 'talked round every tin of bully beef on the peninsula'. Although Keith disclaimed any military knowledge, General Hamilton was described as having completely failed as a strategist. The prescription, devised by Ashmead-Bartlett, was straightforward: undoubtedly the essential and first step to restore the morale of the shaken forces was to recall the general and his chief of staff. Keith recommended that Hamilton be replaced with a 'young leader ... around whom the officers can rally'.

However, Keith did not suggest abandoning the campaign and evacuating the peninsula.<sup>37</sup> Since the Australian divisions would 'strongly resent' the confession of failure that a withdrawal would entail, he hoped the Cabinet would decide to hang on through the winter for another offensive, or for peace. 'The new offensive must be made with a huge army of new troops. Can we get them?'<sup>38</sup>

Keith's overriding priority, he insisted, was the protection of the Australian forces both in strength and reputation. He assured the prime minister that although they were 'dispirited', having 'been through such warfare as no army has seen in any part of the world', they were 'game to the end'.

Keith was placing the Australians on the highest of pedestals. Bean would later observe that during the war 'Murdoch's admiration of the Australian soldiery rose almost to worship.'<sup>39</sup> By contrast, the lowly Tommies were 'toy soldiers' showing 'an atrophy of mind and body that is appalling ... childlike youths without strength to endure or brains to improve their conditions.' Their cowardice, anathema to the Australian troops it would seem, had led to an order 'to shoot without mercy any soldiers who lagged behind or loitered in advance'. (This was a claim that Keith would regret the following year when pressed to substantiate it before the Commission held to probe the Dardanelles campaign.<sup>40</sup>) The Australian stock was eulogised as 'all of good parentage':<sup>41</sup>

But I could pour into your ears so much truth about the grandeur of our Australian army, and the wonderful affection of these fine young soldiers for each other and their homeland, that your Australianism would become a more powerful sentiment than before. It is stirring to see them, magnificent manhood, swinging their fine limbs as they walk about Anzac. They have the noble faces of men who have endured. Oh, if you could picture Anzac as I have seen it, you would find that to be an Australian is the greatest privilege the world has to offer.<sup>42</sup>

To protect reputations and morale Keith advised Fisher to take up the case of Sir John Maxwell, the English commander overseeing Australian recruits in Egypt.<sup>43</sup> Keith had been incensed at Maxwell's reaction to the Australians who had been rioting in the Whasa brothel district of Cairo: Maxwell had described their actions as 'wilful murder'. Keith insisted that 'only a very few of our men' had 'burnt some houses in which they had been drugged and diseased', and he accused Maxwell of attacking the good name of our 'clean and vigorous army'. The

men's reputation was 'too sacred to leave in the hands of' those who would undermine it with unpalatable truths.<sup>44</sup>

It was naïve – he had been shocked by his first experience of the reality of warfare – but also cynical. It was a tool of persuasion.

Re getting rid of Hamilton, Keith would state in 1920: 'I have a perfectly clear conscience as to what I did. I went to London and I hit Sir Ian Hamilton as hard as I could. I thought the vital thing was to get a fresh mind on the spot.' *Herald* (Melbourne), 18 May 1920

To convey immediacy and paint the scene for his readers back home Keith dwelt on the men's bodies in evocative articles about his time at Gallipoli,<sup>45</sup> experimenting with writing in the first person present tense. Praise was wrapped in self-deprecatory rhetoric. Though he did not 'wish to idealise the Australian soldier', the contrast 'between him and other fighters' was so great 'that the tendency everywhere in the Eastern Mediterranean' was 'to worship him as a super-type'.<sup>46</sup> For those enlisting, 'Tales of hardship from Anzac act more as a magnet than as a repeller'.<sup>47</sup>

Two days after sending his letter to Fisher Keith sent a copy to British prime minister Herbert Asquith at the suggestion of Lloyd George. Asquith could see the close relationship<sup>48</sup> between the newly arrived cable manager and the Australian prime minister. Keith clearly had a position of trust at the heart of the Australian government, and he could be candid in discussing issues about which others might have been more reticent.<sup>49</sup> As the former war correspondent and military historian Sir Max Hastings says, 'Boy, Keith Murdoch understood how to promote Keith Murdoch.'<sup>50</sup>

Asquith circulated copies of the letter to the War Cabinet, using the duck-egg-blue foolscap writing paper of the Committee of Imperial Defence, 'the stamp of the ministerial Holy of Holies'.<sup>51</sup> Keith's letter was being read by those at the highest level in the world of the press as well as politics. (A handwritten note at the top of one remaining copy reads: 'Please return to Lord Northcliffe, *The Times*'.<sup>52</sup>)

Within a week the British prime minister was backing away from a letter that he described as being 'largely composed of gossip and second-hand statements'.<sup>53</sup> Winston Churchill believed that Hamilton should not be troubled with 'defending himself from the malicious

charges of an irresponsible newspaper man'.<sup>54</sup> Churchill had forwarded Asquith a note from the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* who had met with Keith and 'was not much impressed':

When I questioned him on details of his report he gave me rather evasive replies. It is quite obvious that he had not seen the things which he described, nor has any personal knowledge of the men he condemned. His information was largely second-hand. I do not say that much of it is not correct, or that some of his criticisms are not justified, but my personal feeling about him is that his statements must be accepted with caution.<sup>55</sup>

Writing a few days later to Lord Murray with a copy of his report to Fisher, Keith was almost apologetic – not for dissembling but for putting his case with 'perhaps excessive frankness'. However, he had 'lived long enough in the world to know that reforms are secured only after heavy jottings.'<sup>56</sup>

In contrast to his first sojourn in London, Keith had wasted no time in making his mark. He joined with the Australian business and political elite in the city: in Bean's view he would come to be 'much the most influential figure'<sup>57</sup> among them. It would be half a century before the contents of Keith's letter were read by the public at large, but through its select circulation he was becoming a central player in the upper echelons of the British Empire. The Canadian prime minister cabled Sir Maxwell Aitken, the powerful press and political operative soon to be ennobled as Lord Beaverbrook, to obtain a copy of it.<sup>58</sup>

Keith's goal now was to influence political and military strategy more generally.<sup>59</sup> Following Ashmead-Bartlett's dismissal from Gallipoli by Hamilton, Keith wrote suggesting that they meet up as soon as he arrived in London.<sup>60</sup> A subsequent edition of the *Sunday Times* had a damning account of the Gallipoli situation by Ashmead-Bartlett; presented as an interview, it sidestepped the censor.<sup>61</sup> Northcliffe asked to reproduce it in the *Times* and *Daily Mail* while Keith cabled the account to his Australian newspapers.<sup>62</sup>

Keith claimed that the English correspondent's dispatches had been 'more valuable to Australia than probably any other writings of any other man since Australia was discovered'. Ashmead-Bartlett's actions following his return to London had 'dragged out into the open, past the censorship, facts about the bungling at the Dardanelles expedition'. Keith gave a heavy hint of his own involvement in this tale, alluding to as yet unpublished circumstances, as well as 'an important letter'.<sup>63</sup>

Though the cogs were already in motion, Keith believed his letter had sealed Hamilton's fate. On 16 October the general received a telegram from Lord Kitchener recalling him from Gallipoli. Once on the ground, his replacement Sir Charles Monro confirmed the appalling conditions and dire prospects for success, and recommended the full of evacuation of the peninsula.<sup>64</sup>

The heat of intrigue over the Dardanelles debacles would forge a lasting relationship between Keith, Bonar Law and Lloyd George, and an even closer, even life-changing bond with another figure, the supreme moulder and destroyer of reputations Lord Northcliffe.

Keith had initially expressed concern about how widely the owner of the *Times* was circulating his letter.<sup>65</sup> The letter 'was of so intimate a character' that its circulation would expose a friendship with Fisher which he held 'sacred'.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, Keith placed himself in Northcliffe's hands, and the young cable manager was soon signing his notes 'Yours very truly'.<sup>67</sup> Northcliffe in turn started addressing notes to 'My Dear Murdoch', displaying a paternal interest in Keith's professional advancement and his personal well-being. He advised him to join the Automobile Club – most useful for interacting with Cabinet ministers – provided him with stopgap funds, and invited him to Sutton Place, his palatial Tudor home.<sup>68</sup>

Being based in the same building as 'the greatest newspaper in the world'<sup>69</sup> gave Keith workaday proximity to Northcliffe. Keith had failed utterly in 1909; now he was secure at the very heart of Fleet Street and crucially, he was his own boss. Keith told his Australian readers that he had been 'privileged these days to get far behind the scenes – to meet and talk frankly with the men in London whose decisions mean life and death to thousands', and Cabinet ministers were asking him 'anxiously what Australia would think of this or that projected move'.<sup>70</sup>

In one of his first newspaper despatches back to the ‘saddened Australian homes’ who were only now learning of the crushing toll of the August offensive at Gallipoli, Keith tried to rescue a sense of achievement from the demise of ‘two of our finest Light Horse regiments’. His countrymen could take pride in how Charles Bean’s ‘stirring account’ of ‘that painful and yet heroic affair in which Australians went face forward to certain death’ was being given ‘great prominence’ in not only the main London newspapers but also the provincial ones. He assured his readers that their sons’ sacrifice had not been in vain: they had enabled Australia’s reputation to be placed ‘as high as any national reputation can be’. And he invoked another emotional image, the scene conveying Keith’s new standing as well as the high regard in which the Anzacs were held:

Yesterday I was with a London newspaper proprietor, who is sometimes called Emperor, so powerful is his influence. We discussed a picture of the men of an Australian field battery feeding the guns. Stripped to the waist, straining at their work, with faces like classical statues of ancient gladiators, these magnificent Australians gave an impression of noble young manhood. The Londoner turned away his head. ‘I cannot look at it,’ he said, ‘or I shall weep at the sight of such splendid life.’<sup>71</sup>

On the copy of the photograph Northcliffe gave Keith as a personal memento<sup>72</sup> the ‘Emperor’ wrote ‘Splendid Men’.<sup>73</sup>

The image would soon gain massive public circulation when printed as an illustration in *The Times History and Encyclopaedia of the War*. Writing up the chapter on Gallipoli provided Keith with an early chance to fix the history and mythology of the tale. In a promotional despatch for the volume<sup>74</sup> Keith told his Australian readers that it would be ‘devoted to the spirit of Anzac’.<sup>75</sup> Sandwiched between the other chapters of propaganda to be printed, bound and distributed around the world,<sup>76</sup> he held aloft the banner of a new religion: Australianism. For Keith Murdoch ‘Anzac was sacred soil; the Australian army was a sacred institution.’<sup>77</sup> Though beset by problems of communication and – he implied – command strategy, the Dardanelles campaign had stiffened the backs of the Australians, leading to a ‘renewed determination to see the war through’

as its leaders ‘moved Londonward ... to take a greater part in Empire control.’ Australia had received a boost, but the commission to write this new history would be used by Keith to help his own cause, too.

In his bestselling book *Gallipoli*, Australian journalist and author Les Carlyon suggests that Keith at the time ‘might just have been walking around with “pawn” written on his back’.<sup>78</sup> Keith was cannier than that. He might not have been the official war correspondent but he was determined to get to the Western Front, and he could see a way to do it. Keith’s keenest ambitions, as Bean noted, were ‘[t]o wield great power’, his diplomacy to this end ‘heavy and obvious, but masterful and usually successful’.<sup>79</sup> Keith’s letter to Pearce, the Australian minister of defence, seems a perfect example:

I have been asked today to write the Anzac number of the *Times* History of the War, and you can bet that I mean to do justice to my country, its leaders, and my countrymen. But I am wandering, the purpose of this letter is to beg you to send me to the front here.

Invoking his actions and the Gallipoli letter Keith suggested that the British government would have no objections to this request, saying that several ministers he had seen ‘at their own request’ had told him that the ministry ‘is under an obligation to me for what I was able to tell them about the Dardanelles.’ His request was granted.<sup>80</sup>

In 2011 a contrite Rupert Murdoch told the family of Milly Dowler, the murdered schoolgirl whose voicemails had been hacked by the *News of the World*, that his newspaper had failed to live up to the standard set by his father: an honourable and respected man, though the British ‘never forgave him for what he exposed about Gallipoli.’<sup>81</sup> Four days later, Rupert trotted out the anti-establishment line of victimhood,<sup>82</sup> mirror to the retooled Gallipoli myth, before the committee of MPs. But in 1915, Keith’s gamble had paid off. His actions had gained him favour not only with the Australian government, but had also acted as an entrée to the most influential part of the British politics, and most crucially, the most powerful powers in the press. A pattern of politicians, whether Australian or British, finding themselves under ‘obligation’ to a Murdoch, had been set.