

## **Ireland will be Free**

Film note by Jeff Kildea

*Ireland will be Free* is a compendium film supporting Irish self-determination which from May 1920 to August 1921 was shown in venues around Australia under the directorship of Joseph Sheedy. Its title evokes the words of the *Shan Van Vocht*, a popular Irish song from the time of the rising of the United Irishmen in 1798.

The film's first public screening was at Melbourne's Princess Theatre on 10 May 1920 to a capacity audience of 2000 that included Archbishop Daniel Mannix. Its main feature was footage by Australian film-pioneer Bert Cross of that year's St Patrick's Day parade when Mannix was escorted by 14 Victoria Cross recipients on horseback and 10 000 returned servicemen marching behind. It also included scenes of Dublin after the Easter Rising, portraits of Irish patriots past and present (including photos of the "martyrs of Easter week") and a re-enactment of the execution of rebel-leader Padraic Pearse. Live entertainment in the form of speeches and Irish music and songs usually rounded off the program.

Shown at a time when the Irish War of Independence was at its height, following the deployment in Ireland of the Black and Tans in March 1920, the film raised the ire of Australia's Empire loyalists. Condemning it as disloyal Sinn Féin propaganda, they raised questions in federal and state parliaments, wrote letters to newspapers, prevailed upon some local authorities to prevent it being screened in town halls (including Melbourne Town Hall) and held meetings to demand it be censored.

Over the next 15 months the film grew in length as new footage was added of contemporary events in Australia and Ireland, including Mannix's departure for Rome in May, the federal government's deportation of Fr Charles Jerger in July and the funeral of Terence MacSwiney, who died on hunger strike in October. Its topicality in such fervid times guaranteed sell-out audiences when it was shown in all capitals (except Perth) and in regional centres in Victoria and Queensland.

The film's final public screenings were in Melbourne in August 1921 on Mannix's return to Australia. With the truce in Ireland the previous month having raised hopes that the film's prophetic title would soon be realised, Mannix told the crowd that welcomed him home at Melbourne's Stadium, "I have not brought back a message that Ireland is free, but Ireland will be free, and that, I hope, before long."