

# Yilgarn

## Once upon a time in Australia

A screenplay

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EXT. A SAND DUNE NEAR FREMANTLE EARLY--- MORNING

The silence is broken by the snort of a horse as it struggles up the slip face of a large, white sand dune, with its rider, CHARLES YELVERTON O'CONNOR. On reaching the top they are greeted by the panorama that is the startling blue of the Indian Ocean and a long white flanking beach with lunate dunes receding into the distance. Some way off is a small wooden jetty.

The horse snorts again in the stillness of the morning. O'Connor urges the animal forward.

He canters through the shallow swash of white surf then suddenly turns into the waves.

CLOSE UP

The horse struggles in the crashing surf.

O'Connor puts a pistol to his head and fires. Blood spurts from his temple. He falls.

Gulls rise in alarm at the sound of the shot.

White foam, stained with blood, swirls into the hoof prints on the sand as the horse gallops away along the beach.

A TRAIN WHISTLE screeches harshly.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT THE DESERT --- DAY

A TRAIN drawn by two steam engines, travels along, sending up a great cloud of grey smoke.

INT A CARRIAGE --- DAY

AILEEN O'CONNOR looks out abstractedly at the desert, through drifting smoke.

She sees, heading in the same direction, as the train:-

AILEEN'S POV

A STRING OF CAMELS with AFGHAN DRIVERS. The drivers watch and salute the passing train and soon they are left behind;

HORSEMEN sending up a cloud of red dust;

A MAN cycling with great difficulty, along the bumpy trail. He has a water bag slung over his shoulder.

The TRAIN WHISTLE sounds a more friendly note.

EXT. KALGOORLIE RAILWAY STATION --- DAY

Kalgoorlie is now a flourishing town. There is an air of great excitement. FLAGS and BUNTING fly from buildings and telegraph poles. TRAMS make their way slowly through the crowds.

CROWDS of people, MINERS, some with their families, mill about and chatter as the train pulls in.

A BRASS BAND is assembling and practising *God Save the King*, with no great musical expertise.

JOHN KIRWAN, holding onto his hat, hurries through the throng. He is formally dressed as befits a Member of the House of Representatives. He side-steps a recalcitrant CAMEL and its swearing DRIVER.

The camel spits and hits a well-dressed LADY who recoils in horror. Her ESCORT produces his handkerchief and begins to repair the damage.

Kirwan sees Aileen alighting from the train and hurries over to greet her. He raises his hat and makes a small deferential bow.

Aileen looks relieved to see him as he takes her travelling bag and begins to conduct her through the crowd.

KIRWAN

...wondering, Miss O'Connor, if I might offer  
you some refreshment before the ceremony.

He gestures towards the imposing frontage of the Palace Hotel.

They skirt a GROUP of VISITORS who are listening to a MAN (BOYD), who wears face paint and has a bone through the septum of his nose, Boyd is lecturing them with great oratorical flourishes on the subject of gold.

BOYD

When I came here in ninety three with old Paddy Hannan this was nothing but bush I tell you...

Boyd is drowned out by an outburst from a SECOND BAND as it marches past.

INT THE LOUNGE OF THE PALACE HOTEL --- DAY

Aileen and Kirwan sit at a table near an open window. The people passing are in high good humour, many of them drinking beer.

KIRWAN

A great day indeed for the gold fields. The culmination, one might say, of your father's work. It is good of you to come here today to represent the family.

He takes a drink from his teacup and waits, watching her.

AILEEN

You will understand that our mother could not bring herself to come. The subject still causes her great distress.

KIRWAN

Of course. Of course. If it would not be too distressing for you also, I should very much like to know something of his early life. If you think me intrusive, please say so.

AILEEN

No, not at all. My father was an exceptional man. It is important that his story should be told.

A MINER, somewhat the worse for drink, spots Kirwan through the window. His mates, including Boyd, watch and laugh.

MINER

Hey, Kirwan, you sly bastard, too high an' mighty to have a drink with us?

Kirwan laughs.

KIRWAN

That's right, mate. Members of Parliament can't be seen to consort with common old dry blowers like you.

Boyd pulls the man away and raises his hat.

BOYD

Take no notice, John. My apologies Miss. The boys mean no harm. Just their natural ebullience breaking out. Such a great day, you understand.

Boyd bows expansively to Aileen. She smiles for the first time.

AILEEN

No offence, I assure you.

The men depart noisily. Aileen raises her eyebrows.

KIRWAN

Ah yes. We get all sorts here. That's old Carr-Boyd, the son of some English lord, I believe. Came out here to make his fortune and find his own way in the world.

AILEEN

And did he?

Kirwan chuckles and takes up a notebook and pencil.

KIRWAN

You might say so, mainly by leading others astray. You have no objection to my taking a few notes, I hope.

AILEEN

Of course not; still the newspaper man at heart. My father's work is all public knowledge, however he may have been

misrepresented. Do you know that in all his years in the public service he never took a holiday?

KIRWAN

His work needs no justification, I assure you. *Si monumentum requieris* and all that. No, it is his motivation that intrigues me, if I may say so. Why did he bother to keep going for so long in the face of such personal attack?

AILEEN

It is no mystery Mr Kirwan. My father operated from a sense of duty. It may be an outmoded concept nowadays but he felt an obligation to serve to the best of his ability. The truth is always simple and that is why his detractors could not believe his word. People called him The Chief and that in the truest sense, is what he was.

From outside comes the sound of a Band playing *Let Erin Remember*.

KIRWAN

"*ere her faithless sons betrayed her*". Yes indeed.

DISSOLVE TO

EXT. HOT SPRINGS NEW ZEALAND --- DAY

A young O'Connor works his way around the springs gingerly on horseback. Steam rises from GEYSERS.

A party of MAORI prisoners in chains passes by under ARMED GUARD.

The Maoris look impassively at O'Connor as they pass.

The VOLCANIC MUD bubbles and HISSES.

INT. A SMALL RAMSHACKLE TOWN HALL---NIGHT

The townspeople are present, dressed in their best finery, which belies their surroundings. One gentleman is admonished by his wife for attempting to sample, before time, some of the fancies prepared for the occasion. He smiles as he notices a small, but more successful hand reaching up from under the table. O'Connor shares a makeshift podium with the MAYOR who reads with difficulty from an illuminated scroll.

MAYOR

*...express our co-co-cordial appre...ciation of the unselfish and voluntary exert...ions put forth by you in the per..formance of your duties amongst us,... and finally in finishing it says...We ca-ca-can only wish ...that our loss may be your...g-gain and that as we are sure you will merit, so may you earn ...elsewhere the kind feelings and respect which you ..have wo-wo-won from us.*

The Mayor finishes with a proud smile and to warm applause.

Gesturing to O'Connor to come forward, he presents him with the scroll.

O'CONNOR

Thank you Mr. Mayor. I am very moved and indeed somewhat embarrassed, as I fail see how I merit this honour.

He breaks into a large grin.

O'CONNOR (CONT'D)

It seems I must thank the artist whose representation of my labours on this beautiful illumination has succeeded in making them appear far more magnificent than I remember.

He holds the scroll up to the gathering.

O'CONNOR (CONT'D)

Some day I may build a railway this true, or a harbour this commodious. Nevertheless I am very proud of the work we have done here and wherever my new position takes me in this colony, I hope I find the people as warm and friendly as you with whom I have lived and worked amongst here.

There is more applause and many people come forward to congratulate O'Connor and others the Mayor on his reading.

EXT. THE SOUTHERN ALPS --- DAY

Rain falls in the forest. A great tree creaks and groans and crashes to the ground.

O'Connor, who has now grown a moustache, is on horseback. He directs a gang of men in clearing a roadway through the forest.

Behind him is a pack-horse bearing his theodolite and surveying instruments. He points upwards towards the peaks and urges his horse forward.

EXT. A FIELD CAMP --- NIGHT

O'Connor and a COMPANION play chess by the light of the campfire.

They hear chains rattling in the darkness.

The firelight shows armed constables with a group of emaciated and obviously mistreated MAORI prisoners.

O'Connor lights a lantern.

O'CONNOR

What have we here, Constable?

CONSTABLE

I have an order here, Sir. These scoundrels are to be employed on your roadworks.

He produces a letter.

CONSTABLE (CONT'D)  
It's a common practice, Sir. Might as well  
get some value out of the bastards.

O'CONNOR  
That will do, Constable.

He examines the letter.

O'CONNOR (CONT'D)  
Very well, very well.

He takes the lantern and goes along the line of Maoris. Their eyes glisten in the  
light.

A Maori bearing the facial tattoos of a CHIEFTAIN, stands impassively,  
ignoring the Europeans.

O'CONNOR (CONT'D)  
Who speaks English here?

The Maoris look at each other. They look to their Chieftain. He nods.

MAORI  
I do. I speak the Pakeha.

O'CONNOR  
All right then. Tell these men the law says  
they must work for me. Tell them if they  
work for me they will wear no chains.

MAORI  
I talk to the chief.

CONSTABLE  
But, sir.

O'CONNOR  
Tell him I want their word.

The Maoris converse volubly. They laugh.

O'CONNOR  
These constables have orders to shoot any  
man who tries to escape.

The Maori Chieftain looks at O'Connor for a long moment.

O'CONNOR.

If you work for me you will get fair  
treatment. Have I got your word?

The Maoris consult again.

O'Connor waits.

The Chieftain nods again.

MAORI

You got the word, Chief.

O'Connor looks at him in surprise then goes along the line, shaking hands with  
each man in turn and looking directly at him.

O'CONNOR

Constable, remove these shackles.

CONSTABLE

But, sir!

O'CONNOR

Do as I say and see that these men are fed.  
And see to your own men too.

The Constable shrugs. He removes the chains.

The Chieftain throws his shackles aside. He looks silently for a moment at his  
badly cut wrists, the result of previous struggles.

He steps towards O'Connor and takes him by the shoulders.

The Constable goes to intervene but O'Connor waves him back.

The Chieftain formally rubs noses with O'Connor, emitting small grunts as he  
does so.

He steps back and turns away.

O'Connor returns to his game of chess. He moves a knight.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN SOUTH ISLAND --- DAY

The opening of an adit cut into the hillside, is shored up with branches and rotten timbers.

An explosion is heard. Dust and debris fly out of the opening.

As the dust settles, two excited figures, PADDY HANNAN and TOM FLANAGAN, emerge from behind nearby boulders, gasping and brushing dust from their clothes.

INT. IN THE ADIT --- TORCHLIGHT

Hannan and Flanagan follow a series of en-echelon quartz veins along the walls of the drive, with hand held torches.

The recently blasted area has not been supported. They move debris aside as they go.

FLANAGAN'S POV

Hannan crawls ahead of him and wriggles into a small opening. He is excited.

FLANAGAN  
This could be the big one, hey Pad...

Suddenly and silently the hanging wall drops out, cutting off Flanagan's words in mid sentence.

FLANAGAN'S POV.

A pile of rock; dust floating in the air.

He turns and runs.

EXT. O'CONNOR'S FIELD CAMP --- DAY

Flanagan approaches on foot, breathless and trying to shout.

O'Connor, emerging from a tent, speaks to him and immediately takes charge. Men gather tools, rope and timber.