

# ‘The Greatest War Correspondent of the Twentieth Century’: Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and *The Daily Telegraph*

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## Introduction

War correspondents are an extraordinary type of journalist, and one of the most outstanding amongst them worked for *The Daily Telegraph*. At his death the newspaper reported:

‘With the death of Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett passes not only the greatest war correspondent of the twentieth century, but one of the most picturesque and romantic figures in the history of journalism.

‘He was a brilliant writer, he had enormous resource and unsurpassable courage, and above all, he had that knack, which is a kind of genius, of being invariably on the spot.’<sup>1</sup>

Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett (1881–1931) worked for *The Daily Telegraph* covering the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, the French Army on the Western Front in 1916, and the revolutionary intrigues that were rife in Central Europe in 1919. After a period as a Conservative MP, he took up his reporting duties for the paper once more, travelling to the world’s trouble spots including China, Soviet Russia, Palestine and India. But it was for his work during the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 that he is best known. Uniquely amongst the war correspondents of 1914–18, Ashmead-Bartlett sought to evade the constraints of censorship

and alert Britain’s political leaders to the failure of the campaign. He asked a visiting Australian, Keith Murdoch (who went on to found a media empire now run by his son, Rupert), to smuggle his deeply critical letter back to London, thus playing a potentially pivotal role in bringing Gallipoli to an end.

## Ashmead-Bartlett’s Early Career

Fearless, flamboyant, and somewhat racketsy, Ashmead-Bartlett came from a well-connected family. A colleague once described him as ‘a chap with an exceedingly nice nature but vilely brought up in the sort of wild selfish third rate society that surrounded his father’.<sup>2</sup> This was a reference to Sir Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, a Conservative MP himself, who rose to become the Civil Lord of the Admiralty in Lord Salisbury’s governments. Sir Ellis’ scandalous affair with Blanche Hozier, mother of Clementine Churchill, caused consternation in 1889, whilst his brother married the richest heiress in England, Angela Burdett Coutts, who was thirty years his senior. Sir Ellis died on the verge of bankruptcy, leaving his son to live with his wealthy aunt and uncle for a time. Ashmead-Bartlett’s own gambling habit and lavish tastes led him to bankruptcy on three occasions, and brought the end of his political career.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, UK: Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett papers, Campbell Dixon, ‘The Man on the Spot’, (no date): I 228.

<sup>2</sup> Australian War Memorial, Canberra, Australia: C.E.W. Bean papers, diary, 2 October 1915: AWM 38 3DRL 606, item 17.

<sup>3</sup> Hiley, ‘Making War: The British News Media and Government Control 1914–16’, 144; Hiley, ‘Enough Glory for All’: Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and Sir Ian Hamilton at the Dardanelles’, 245. Felicity Barnes, ‘Bartlett, Ellis Ashmead- (1881–1931)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2015 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/56814>, accessed 1 Oct 2015].

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Ashmead-Bartlett's adventures had begun when as a sixteen-year-old he accompanied his father to observe the Greco-Turkish War in 1897. He served in the British Army after school for six years, fought in the South African War, and rose to the rank of captain by the time of his resignation in 1904. Financial struggles followed, and in 1904 he turned to war correspondence for the first time, covering the Russo-Japanese war with considerable success. He had found his niche. By the time the First World War broke out he was a highly experienced journalist.



Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett as a junior officer in the Bedfordshire Regiment, c. 1900

## Financial Troubles

Nevertheless, Ashmead-Bartlett remained plagued by financial difficulties. Kitchener's prohibition on war correspondence at the beginning of the war was the final nail in the coffin for Ashmead-Bartlett's pre-existing cash flow problems. He was declared bankrupt in December 1914, and the opportunity to return to war reporting presented a financial godsend. Matters were made all the more acute by the fact that the London newspapers represented by the Newspaper Proprietors'

Association (NPA) had lost a third or more of its income from advertising since the war's outbreak. The NPA therefore restricted the publication of Ashmead-Bartlett's reports to the London morning papers in the first instance, allowing them to be syndicated in London and overseas, but not in provincial papers.<sup>4</sup>

More broadly, Ashmead-Bartlett's fragile financial situation was not improved by his lavish lifestyle – by 1914 his outgoings were double his income. Characteristically, then, whilst enjoying his adventures at the front, he ensured that life was as comfortable as possible when he was on campaign. In South Africa, he took a mixed case of champagne, port and whisky when he went to war, concealing it in his Company's ammunition cart when necessary.<sup>5</sup> At Gallipoli, he was initially based on the battleship, *London*, where he enjoyed cocktails the evening before the landings on the peninsula.<sup>6</sup> Later, when the war correspondents were based at Imbros, he ensured a supply of champagne for frequent parties. His colleague Henry Nevinson described his lifestyle at the front:

'He would issue from his elaborately furnished tent dressed in a flowing robe of yellow silk shot with crimson, and call for breakfast as though the Carlton were still his corporeal home. Always careful of food and drink, he liked to have everything fine and highly civilised about him, both for his own sake and for the notable guests whom he loved to entertain.'<sup>7</sup>

To sustain such a lifestyle, Ashmead-Bartlett sought to supplement his £2000 salary as a war correspondent by other means. In addition to asking for a raise during the campaign, he had photographs from the front published and promised sketches for another editor.<sup>8</sup> He also took the only cinematographic film at the front, from which he received 45 per cent of any profit arising.<sup>9</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett later lectured on the campaign in Australia (lucrative plans for Britain

<sup>4</sup> Hiley, 'Enough Glory for All': Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and Sir Ian Hamilton at the Dardanelles', 44–5.

<sup>5</sup> Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett papers, 'Some reminiscences': ICS 84/C5/6: 6–8.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Australia: Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, diary, 24 April 1915, A1583: 36. Available online: [http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/\\_transcript/2014/D24757/a6833.html](http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/_transcript/2014/D24757/a6833.html).

<sup>7</sup> Nevinson, *Last Changes, Last Chances*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Macleod, 'Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, War Correspondence and the First World War', 35.

<sup>9</sup> Dutton, 'More Vivid than the Written Word': Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett's Film, With the Dardanelles Expedition (1915)', 208.

and America having been curtailed by ill-health), where he sold his papers to the Mitchell Library in Sydney. He republished his despatches from the campaign in two books, and in 1928 wrote a third book, *The Uncensored Dardanelles*, that was highly critical of the campaign.<sup>10</sup>

## Gallipoli Beckons: Ashmead-Bartlett as War Correspondent

Although the work of war correspondents was initially tightly constrained by the War Office, with the launch of the Dardanelles campaign, Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, proposed that journalists should accompany the British forces fighting there.<sup>11</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett was chosen to report for the Newspaper Proprietors' Association by its chairman, Harry Lawson, who was also his boss at *The Daily Telegraph*. Ashmead-Bartlett and his colleague Lester Lawrence (the myopic Reuters correspondent) travelled from London with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force in April 1915. All told at least fifteen men filed reports from the Dardanelles and Gallipoli, but Ashmead-Bartlett's work there was the most significant and accomplished.<sup>12</sup>

Ashmead-Bartlett had travelled to the front via Rome, and drawing on his long-standing connections with the Ottoman Empire, there he dined with the Military Attaché and First Secretary of the Turkish Embassy. He wrote in his diary:

'Thinking I might be able to obtain some valuable information from these two gentlemen, I consented to break the strict etiquette of war and to meet my enemies at dinner. [...] He (the Military Attaché) told me many interesting facts about the attack of our fleet on 18 March. He said the Turks had been greatly frightened by the volume and intensity of the fire of the ships' guns, but that the actual damage was almost nil.'<sup>13</sup>

The next day he was allowed to read the official account of the operations: 'It only served to confirm my opinions that we were hopelessly underestimating our task, and that the attack on 18 March had never stood any chance of succeeding'.<sup>14</sup> This information informed one of his earliest reports from the front which 'caused the first of the many sensations which the Dardanelles were to produce in the course of the next eight months'.<sup>15</sup> In this extract, we see not only Ashmead-Bartlett's early critical stance and his delight in controversy, but also the fact that his purported diary was actually reconstructed later, after he lost his original diary along with all his belongings when the *Majestic* sank on the night of 26–27 May 1915.<sup>16</sup> Of that brush with death, a survivor of the sinking later reported:

'I saw Mr Ashmead-Bartlett standing on the quarter-deck. Without the least dramatic show he glanced at his wristwatch, then at the men who dashed past him in their hopeful race for life.

'There he stood gambling with death. He was there where seconds only divided him from the *Majestic's* last plunge. Then at the last moment he took to the water, and was rescued. I never saw a cooler, calmer man.'<sup>17</sup>

Prior to the sinking of the *Majestic*, Ashmead-Bartlett filed a series of reports observing the campaign. The despatch from Gallipoli for which Ashmead-Bartlett is most famous recounted the landings by the Anzac soldiers that formed part of the invasion of the peninsula on 25 April. News of the landings had been announced on 26 April, but it was not until 7 May in Britain (8 May in Australia and New Zealand) that an eager public had the opportunity to read Ashmead-Bartlett's detailed

<sup>10</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett, *Ashmead-Bartlett's Despatches from the Dardanelles: An Epic of Heroism*; Ashmead-Bartlett, *Some of my experiences in the Great War*; Ashmead-Bartlett, *The Uncensored Dardanelles*.

<sup>11</sup> Hiley, 'Making War: The British News Media and Government Control 1914–16', 144.

<sup>12</sup> Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli*, 103–5.

<sup>13</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett diary, 27 March 1915, A1583: 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett diary, 28 March 1915, A1583: 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett diary, 20 April 1915, A1583: 23.

<sup>16</sup> Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli*, 109.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell Dixon, 'The Man on the Spot', (no date) Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett papers, I 228.

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account. It captured the tension of the scene as he observed the Australian soldiers approaching the coast of Gallipoli before dawn:

‘Very slowly the snakes of boats steamed past the battleships, the gunwales almost flush with the water, so crowded were they with khaki figures. [...] Every eye and every glass was fixed on that grim looking line of hills in our front, so shapeless yet so menacing in the gloom.’<sup>18</sup>



Full-page image of *The Telegraph's* report of the Dardanelles landings, 7 May 1915 and (inset) the title of Ashmead-Bartlett's piece, 'Graphic Story from the Dardanelles'.

From the first wounded men he learned what had happened as the boats approached the shore:

‘It was a trying moment, but the Australian volunteers rose as a man to the occasion. They waited neither for orders nor for the boats to reach the beach, but, springing out into the sea, they waded ashore and forming some sort of a rough line rushed straight on the flashes of the enemy's rifles. Their magazines were not even charged. So they just

went in with cold steel, and I believe I am right in saying that the first Ottoman Turk since the last Crusade received an Anglo-Saxon bayonet in him at 5 minutes after 5 a.m. on 25 April. It was over in a minute. The Turks in the first trench were bayoneted or ran away, and a Maxim gun was captured.’<sup>19</sup>

Ashmead-Bartlett's vivid description made warfare sound like an exciting adventure. Unafraid to make bold claims on sometimes flimsy evidence (such as a precise timing for the first death), he drew occasionally outlandish historical allusions to paint a picture of a 'race of athletes' who were born warriors. Much later in the campaign, his Australian counterpart, Charles Bean, complained in his diary:

‘I can't write about bayonet charges like some of the correspondents do. Ashmead-Bartlett makes it a little difficult for one by his exaggerations, and yet he's a lover of the truth. He gives the spirit of the thing, but if he were asked: 'Did a shout really go up from a thousand throats that the hill was ours?' he'd have to say 'No, it didn't'. Or if they said 'Did the New Zealanders really club their rifles and kill three men at once?' or 'Did the first battle of Anzac really end with the flash of bayonets all along the line, a charge, and the rolling back of the Turkish attack', he'd have to say: 'Well, – no, as a matter of fact that didn't occur'. Well, I can't write that it occurred if I know it did not.’<sup>20</sup>

## The Constraints of Censorship

Yet, for all that he was prone to exaggeration in order to convey the romance of war, Ashmead-Bartlett could also be highly critical and would not countenance the censorship of his opinions. At first, the Royal Navy was broadly responsible for checking the journalists' work, and proved surprisingly benevolent. For example, Commodore Keyes and Captain Godfrey RM allowed Ashmead-Bartlett to publish critical judgements on the failure of the naval attack of 18 March.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> E. Ashmead-Bartlett (Dardanelles, 24, 26 and 27 April), 'Graphic story from the Dardanelles. Historic scenes. Army disembarked by moonlight. Dashing colonials. Capture of positions. Special cablegrams', *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 1915.

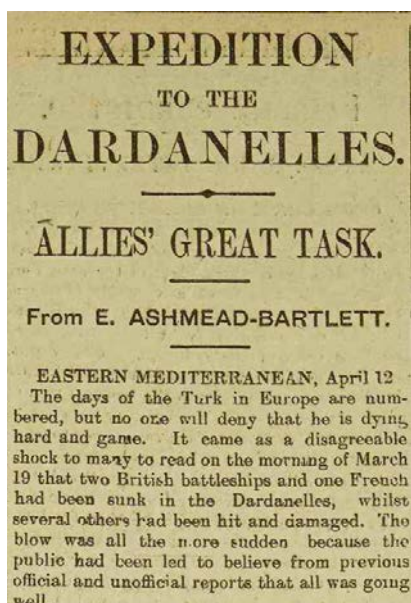
<sup>19</sup> E. Ashmead-Bartlett (Dardanelles, 24, 26 and 27 April), 'Graphic story from the Dardanelles. Historic scenes. Army disembarked by moonlight. Dashing colonials. Capture of positions. Special cablegrams', *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 1915.

<sup>20</sup> Australian War Memorial: C.E.W. Bean diary, 26 September 1915: AWM 38 3DRL 606, item 17.

<sup>21</sup> 'Expedition to the Dardanelles', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 April 1915.



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The more the task of forcing the Straits is examined, the more stupendous proportions does it assume. We do not know what number of troops the Turks have on the Peninsula and on the Asiatic side, but it must not be forgotten that they have had ample time and ample warning to bring up any reinforcements which are available from the needs of the other theatres of war. They are entrenched up to their necks, and have placed barbed wire round every position. The Fleet has done, and is doing, everything possible to assure success, in the face of obstacles such as no Fleet has taken on before. The tale of gallant deeds is a long and glorious one. But the facts must be faced. They are briefly these:

(Top) 'Title and opening paragraph of Ashmead-Bartlett's second despatch for *The Telegraph*, 'Expedition to the Dardanelles', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 April 1915, and (Bottom) an extract from the report.

However, Ashmead-Bartlett increasingly came into conflict with the censorship arrangements once staff from General Sir Ian Hamilton's GHQ took over the task after the landings.<sup>22</sup> He came to the view that Hamilton and his staff were 'concealing the truth from the Authorities at home'.<sup>23</sup>

Since he viewed himself not as 'an official eyewitness' but as 'an independent critic', Ashmead-Bartlett was set on a collision course with Hamilton.<sup>24</sup>

Ashmead-Bartlett returned to London in late May after he lost his belongings on the *Majestic*. He wrote a memorandum to the British Prime Minister, Asquith, which painted a critical picture of a campaign that had come close to disaster and required very substantial reinforcements. He also shared his views in person with Asquith and a range of senior figures; a summary of his memo was presented to Cabinet.<sup>25</sup> When Ashmead-Bartlett returned to Gallipoli in late June, he found his freedom of movement severely curtailed and censorship ever stricter. By September, his frustrations reached their limit. By that point, a new offensive at Anzac in combination with new landings further up the coast at Suvla had failed, and thus all reasonable hope of victory in the campaign had evaporated. He wrote afresh to Asquith:

'Our last great effort to achieve some definite success against the Turks was the most ghastly and costly fiasco in our history since the Battle of Bannockburn. Personally I never thought the scheme decided on by Headquarters ever had the slightest chance of succeeding and all efforts now to make out that it only just failed [...] bare no relation to the real truth.

'[...] The Staff seem to have carefully searched for the most difficult points and then threw away thousands of lives in trying to take them by frontal attacks.

'[...] The army is in fact in a deplorable condition. Its morale as a fighting force has suffered greatly and the officers and men are thoroughly dispirited. The muddles and mismanagement beat anything that has ever occurred in our Military History. The fundamental evil at the present moment is the absolute lack of confidence in all ranks in the Headquarters staff. [...] The Commander in Chief and his Staff are openly spoken of [...] with derision.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli*, 121.

<sup>23</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett diary, 19 May 1915, A1583: 65.

<sup>24</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett diary, 20 May 1915, A1583: 67.

<sup>25</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett, 'Review of the situation in Gallipoli', A1583: 217–237. For further details of Ashmead-Bartlett's activities, see Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli*, 126–131.

<sup>26</sup> Ashmead-Bartlett to Asquith, 8 September 1915, A1583: 245–7.

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The letter, with its searing criticisms of a bungled campaign, was smuggled away from Gallipoli by the visiting Australian journalist, Keith Murdoch, but it was seized from him at Marseilles. Murdoch wrote his own version to the Australian Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, which was forwarded to the British Cabinet. A copy of Ashmead-Bartlett’s letter was delivered in October when he returned home following his dismissal for breaking censorship regulations. Shortly afterwards, Hamilton was replaced as Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, and after some political dithering, the campaign was abandoned. Gallipoli was evacuated in two stages in December 1915 and January 1916.

Although Hamilton blamed Murdoch and Ashmead-Bartlett for his downfall, they were not the only eyewitness critics of the campaign. Both men have been celebrated by some as whistle-blowers amidst the carnage of the First World War.<sup>27</sup> Yet the journalists’ criticisms only had an impact because the politicians in London were already dissatisfied with the campaign.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion: A Lasting Legacy

Ashmead-Bartlett’s actions mark him out as an independent-minded figure who recognised the importance of war correspondence for a nation-in-arms.<sup>29</sup> His reports for *The Daily Telegraph* and other national newspapers were the most vivid source of information about the most significant campaign of the war to date. They were doubtless avidly read across Britain and far beyond. Indeed, his reports of the campaign also played a vital role in laying the groundwork for the Anzac legend, which shaped how Australia and New Zealand viewed Gallipoli.<sup>30</sup> The commemoration of the campaign has subsequently become central to both nations’ sense of identity.<sup>31</sup> Amidst an unusually exciting life, therefore, it is for his words and deeds in 1915 that the arrogant adventurer Ashmead-Bartlett is remembered.

<sup>27</sup> Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth Maker from the Crimea to Vietnam*, 84–7; Simpson, *Unreliable Sources: How the 20th Century Was Reported*, 149–151; Kirby, ‘Gallipoli. When Murdoch Went to War’.

<sup>28</sup> Fewster, ‘Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and the Making of the Anzac Legend’, 24–5.

<sup>29</sup> For further discussion of the war correspondent’s role, see Macleod, ‘Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, War Correspondence and the First World War’.

<sup>30</sup> Inglis, ‘The Australians at Gallipoli – I’, 222; Fewster, ‘Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and the Making of the Anzac Legend’.

<sup>31</sup> Macleod, *Gallipoli*, chs 5 and 6.

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