

# Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique: First World War Films



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contains a large variety of newsreels, documentary and feature films, mostly produced in the decade after the war. The images include representations of Belgium ("Poor Little Belgium") as a victim of the 'Great War', the fate and suffering of women during the war or the Flemish emancipation and how films mainly produced by Clemens De Landtsheer contributed to the myth of the Flemish soldier on the Yser. During the war a film unit (Le Service Cinématographique de l'Armée belge) was formed by the Belgian Army. Once the country was liberated, the Belgian audiences could look their images of life behind the trenches, together with reports on dozens of patriotic manifestations which were attended by war invalids and veterans.

Women like the Belgian saleswoman Gabrielle Petit, the British nurse Edith Cavell and a young girl like Yvonne Vieslet lived and/or worked in occupied Belgium (1914-1918). Petit, who enrolled in the medical service of the Belgian Red Cross, was very active in the resistance movement and developed espionage activities from 1914 on. She was also an active distributor of the clandestine newspaper *La Libre Belgique*. In the two important fiction films "*La Libre Belgique/The Heroic Gabrielle Petit*" (1921, Armand Du Plessy) and "*Femme belge Gabrielle Petit*" (1928, Francis Martin) a portrait is outlined of this martyr of Belgian nationalism. She was executed by a firing squad in 1916. The British nurse Edith Cavell risked her own life by rescuing some 200 Allied prisoners of War from the Germans. Cavell, influential pioneer of modern nursing in Belgium was arrested for treason and executed in 1915. "*Dawn*" (1928, Herbert Wilcox) offers a controversial representation of the brave, patriotic woman. Yvonne Vieslet was one of the youngest victims of the War. Only ten years old she was murdered by German soldiers while she was giving her school lunch to a French prisoner of War (1918). Her sad and tragic story is depicted in "*La jeune Belgique/Young Belgium*" (1922, Armand Du Plessy).

Ten years after WW I, war veteran and secretary of the Yser Pilgrimage Committee, Clemens De Landtsheer, makes a Flemish propaganda film that serves the Flemish emancipation cause : "Met onze jongens aan den IJzer/ With Our Troops on the Yser" (1928-1929). De Landtsheer gives a very specific vision on the Great War. He uses and combines archival material and staged images from existing fiction films. His openly subjective focus is put on the suffering of Flemish soldiers at the front and on the social abuses, where Flemish soldiers are dominated and exploited by French speaking officers. "With Our Troops on the Yser" mythologizes the reality of the Flemish emancipation cause and the suffering of the Flemish soldiers. The film was screened more than 400 times in the interwar period. This success inspired De Landtsheer to found a production company, Flandria Film, which produced and distributed a number of films between 1929 and 1940. "With Our Troops on the Yser" and other De Landtsheer films contributed to the success of the Flemish emancipation movement. The films by Clemens De Landtsheer have an important value in the research on the causes and evolution of Flemish nationalism.