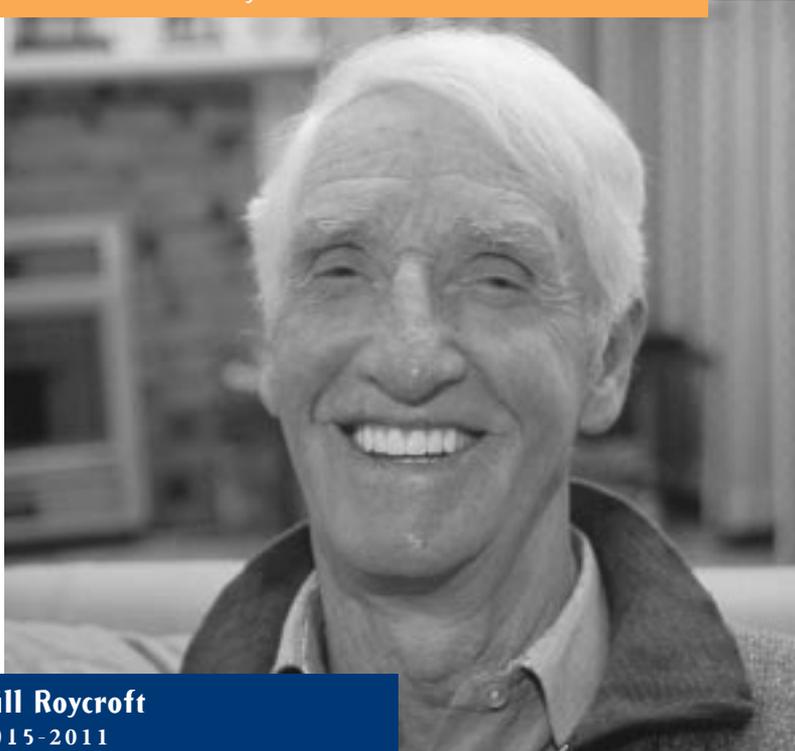


AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Bill Roycroft

1915-2011

Olympic Equestrian

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 7 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Bill Roycroft

Director/Producer Robin Hughes **Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

Duration 26 minutes **Year** 1999

Study Guide prepared by Roger Stitson © NFSA

Also in Series 7: Jim Cairns, Rosalie Gascoigne, Priscilla Kincaid-Smith, Charles Perkins, Peter Sculthorpe, Victor Smorgon

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SYNOPSIS

Bill Roycroft is one of the world's most successful and best-loved equestrians. He developed his superb horseriding skills as a boy growing up in a poor farming family in rural Victoria and by coming of age as a farm worker in the tough conditions of the Great Depression. After serving in the Second World War, he became a soldier settler with a young wife and family. These early struggles prevented Bill from pursuing his dream, and it wasn't until 1960 that he competed in his first Olympics. At the age of 45, he went to Rome as a member of the Australian equestrian team, and with one ride created an Olympic legend.

After a fall that left him with bad concussion, a broken collarbone and severe bruising, Roycroft climbed back on his horse and, to everyone's astonishment, finished the course before being rushed to hospital. The very next day, he defied doctors' orders and rode a perfect final round in the event, knowing this was necessary to secure a gold medal for the Australian team.

Roycroft went on to compete in four more Olympics and was winning events well into his 60s. His sons and daughter-in-law have followed his lead and the Roycroft family has featured strongly in the international world of horseriding.

Bill Roycroft is a wonderful example of a type of Australian who may well be disappearing. In the tradition of the Man from Snowy River and other Australian rural heroes, his courage, loyalty, laconic bush humour and, above all, his capacity to endure, are well displayed in this enthralling portrait of a great Australian horseman.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Physical Education, Sport and Leisure, Studies of Society and Environment, History and Media Studies.

WHAT DO YOU RECALL FROM VIEWING THE PROGRAM?

- Where did Bill's family live when he was a child, and what did his father do for a living?
- What were the early influences in Bill's life that made him an expert horserider?
- What happened to split up Bill's family, and how did he earn a living at 15?
- Where did Bill meet girls as a young man and how did he gain the courage to approach them?
- What was the name of the girl Bill eventually married?
- Where was Bill sent during World War Two and what job did he have to carry out?
- Why was Bill sent home to Australia before the end of the war?
- Why did Bill become a soldier settler after the war?
- As a soldier settler, what was Bill's involvement in equestrian events, and where did he practise with his horses?
- What gave Bill the feeling he could succeed in equestrian events in the Olympic Games?
- How old was Bill when he went to the Rome Olympics in 1960, and what was the preferred age for equestrian competitors? Why didn't he compete in previous Olympics?
- During the three-day cross-country event, what happened to Bill and his horse?
- Why did Bill release himself from hospital against medical advice, and what was the result of this?
- Why didn't Bill enjoy the Mexico Olympics in 1968? What position did his team finish in?
- How old was Bill at the 1972 Munich Olympics?
- What bad memories does Bill have of the Munich Games, and why?
- What was special for Bill about competing in the 1976 Montreal Olympics?
- When Bill had been a poor dairy farmer, how had he been able to afford to buy horses, and what kinds of horses did he deliberately select?
- Bill has regrets. What would he like to have changed in his life?
- What, or who, is Bill most proud of? What does he think of his Olympic achievements?

THE EARLY YEARS

In the program Bill describes what we might consider today to be a very difficult, almost primitive rural existence of struggle and toil, yet it wasn't all gloom and doom.

- Working in pairs or individually, carry out research to discover whether there are any major differences between the life of a small-scale dairy farmer in the early decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century. Are there any similarities? Construct a wall poster about the life of a family on the land, reflecting the differences and similarities you have observed between one era and another.
- Recall Bill's description of the day he fell off a horse while riding to school. Write a five-minute radio play, with dialogue and sound effects built into the script, either based on this incident or on a story from your own imagination, of being part of a large family of children riding on horseback through rough bushland to and from the country schoolhouse. With help from others in the class, you may be able to perform and record the play. (Some ideas about how to plan and record a radio play are contained in Film Australia's study guide, in the **Australian Biography** series, about the actor Charles 'Bud' Tingwell.)
- In the program Bill describes dance nights in bush towns. Write a short story about an old-time, Saturday night country dance. (Although set many years earlier, Steele Rudd's **On Our Selection** comedy stories will give you a good impression, in fictional form, of dances and wedding celebrations in the Australian bush; the 1995 film **Dad and Dave: On Our Selection** will also help set the scene.)
- Plan, write and illustrate a two-page spread for The Show Pony Club Calendar monthly magazine, featuring the social occasion of an equestrian competition showday (where Bill met his future wife).
- Write, in diary form, of the lonely life of a struggling rabbit trapper during the Great Depression; research and discuss in class current attitudes, methods, laws and regulations towards rabbit trapping (and the trapping of other animals considered to be vermin), asking what has altered between the time of the Depression years and today, and why?

- Imagine you are a politician of the early 1930s. You have been asked by your political party to write a 500-word report on the causes of the Great Depression in Australia, and to offer some suggestions as to how to solve some of the problems that are having a terrible economic and social impact on people. Research, plan and write the official report. (Remember that reports are generally written in numbered sections and sub-sections, with clearly-marked headings and sub-headings, in rather formal, objective language: they are very different in style from more personal types of writing. In carrying out your research, you may have to look at how international events, especially in the United States of America, contributed to the Depression in Australia.)
- Working in groups of three or four, or as part of a whole class project, research and construct a web site, or build a set of daily newspaper pages (dated 1932, as though reporting the previous day's events) about the difficulties many people, young and old, had to endure during the years of the Great Depression in Australia. Concentrate mainly on rural life, but consider also the mass unemployment of city people, and how they survived. Look at income and government benefits (the 'Susso'), availability and abundance of food and housing, methods of travel and transport (eg the lack of cars for most people), attitudes to politicians and the wealthy, the extent and availability of schooling, entertainment (the cinema, radio, dances and recorded music etc), street demonstrations and the attitude of police, and the effects of the Depression on family life.

WORLD WAR TWO

In the program we discover that Bill Roycroft's World War Two experiences in the army relate to the activities of Australian troops against the Japanese, mainly in Papua New Guinea, the scene of what has become famous as the site of the Kokoda Trail, where many Australians endured appalling hardship, illness and tropical disease. Australians also fought elsewhere during this war, such as in northern Africa; the following study suggestions, though, mainly apply to the Pacific region in Australia's immediate north.

- Plan and write a history research project about the Kokoda Trail, including maps, illustrations of soldier uniforms, armaments and insignia of both Australian and Japanese troops, the living conditions and survival rate, statistics on deaths by military combat and disease, the reasons for troop movements in the region and whether any ultimate gain or advantage to either side was served by it.
- You are a soldier or a member of the medical corps—either Australian or Japanese—in Papua New Guinea during the war. Write a letter home to a loved one about your experiences, expressing your feelings, as well as your thoughts and opinions about what you have witnessed.
- You are a relative or friend in Australia, of someone serving in the Pacific theatre of war; your life is affected by the usual aspects of war for people on the 'home front', such as food and petrol rationing, black-outs, military training manoeuvres, the organising of prisoner of war relief mailings etc. Write a letter to your friend or relative.
- Find out about, and discuss in class, with specific examples, the meaning and purpose of government and military propaganda, and the extent of press censorship during times of military conflict. (Note that today this extends to other areas of the news media—radio, television and the internet; you may wish to research this topic as it relates to contemporary conflicts.)

- Taking press censorship and government propaganda into account, construct a newspaper front page, containing headlines, news reports and illustrations or photographs, of the kind that would have been published in Australia during the war on any 'typical' day of the week.
- As a class activity involving all students, plan, write, produce, act and record a radio drama play about Australians either in the Pacific war region (such as New Guinea) or at home (city or rural) during World War Two.
- Bill indicates in the program his intense criticism of the Australian World War Two military commander, General Thomas Blamey. Either build a website or construct a large wall poster, depicting a biography of Blamey's life and war-time activities. Add a commentary of argumentative opinion to it, defining whether Blamey was a success or not in his military judgements and actions, and whether he was fairly open to the type of criticism that Roycroft offers.
- An Australian now regarded as a great hero during the Second World War, in the Pacific theatre of the conflict, was Edward 'Weary' Dunlop. As for the Thomas Blamey exercise above, construct a website or poster biography about Dunlop.

SOLDIER SETTLERS

During the program Bill describes how and why he became a 'soldier settler' immediately after World War Two. The following activities ask you to expand on this topic.

- Research and write 500-700 words on what soldier settlements were, who lived in them, how they operated after World War Two, why they were set up and whether they were government-funded, where they were built and whether they were successful. (In drawing your conclusions about their success, you may have to make comparisons between the system that operated after World War Two and the system that existed after World War One.)
- Imagine you are the young son or daughter of a soldier settler. A cousin of your own age visits you from the city. Describe to your cousin, as though in a conversation, what it is like for you living in a soldier settlement. (You may wish to plan this either as a two-person play script or a one-person monologue, which could be presented out loud to the class.)

OLYMPIC GAMES

Bill took part in Olympic Games competition in 1960, 1964, 1968, 1972 and 1976. Most of the suggestions for activities presented below concentrate on those years.

- After researching Bill's famous ride to help the Australian equestrian team win the gold medal in Rome, 1960, plan and present a 'live' description of the ride as though you were an on-the-spot radio reporter. Don't forget the dramatic 'background' story of Bill's 'escape' from a hospital bed to take part in the event. You may wish to record it for a website, connecting it to a web page of photographs and other images such as newspaper headlines about the event. (Note in comparison that television reporters are often silent, allowing the pictures to tell the story, whereas radio reporters must describe fluently what is happening, to build up for their listeners a complete image of the scene, the action, the crowd, the suspense, drama and comedy etc.)
- Write the same story of Bill's ride from the horse's point of view.
- Prepare an illustrated magazine article designed for children, discussing one great sporting story from each of the Olympic Games, from 1960 to 1976 (not necessarily an equestrian event).

- What was the Munich Massacre of the 1972 Games? Plan and write an informative essay about what happened, the reasons for it, who was involved, and the outcome and consequences.
- In the program Bill mentions that many competitors in 1960 had dropped out of his Olympic event because of injuries and accidents. Examine the current rules and regulations related to equestrian events, particularly the cross-country competition and the steeple-chase. Are they the same as for decades ago or have any changes been introduced? What do organisations such as the RSPCA have to say about these events in relation to animal welfare? Compare this to the opinions expressed by those who race horses and who take part in a range of equestrian events. After researching this issue, draw your own conclusions about the validity of equestrian sports, then take part in an all-class discussion or a formal debate on the statement, 'Equestrian competitions are cruel to horses and should be banned'.
- Other members of the Roycroft family have been involved in many Olympic Games equestrian events, both as competitors and coaches, from 1976 onwards. Write a description of their involvement in the Games.

LEGENDS AND HEROES

Often the heroic exploits of individuals take on a life of their own—valorised down the years, fictionalised, altered for the sake of dramatising a good story—and enter into common folklore. The following activities look at aspects of this.

- In the 1996 Olympics Gillian Rolton experienced a similar situation to that of Bill Roycroft in 1960, when she was injured during one of the equestrian events. Find out what happened to her, and the eventual outcome, then design a large display poster featuring both Roycroft and Rolton as 'Aussie Olympic heroes'.
- Read 'Banjo' Paterson's famous poems, 'The Man From Snowy River', 'Clancy of the Overflow' and any other of his 'hero' poems dealing with horses and riders (see website, page 5). After discussing in class the stories being told in these poems, and the way they have been presented in rhyming verse 'ballad' form, plan and write your own poem about Bill Roycroft's exploits. You may want to title it The Legend of Bill Roycroft. Draw an illustration for each verse. You are now a performance poet: read your work out to the class. Place the poem and the illustrations on a class wall display, or on a web page.
- Collect relevant newspaper and magazine cuttings or video-record television programs and bring them to class to share with students for the following activity. Discuss examples taken from current publications, television news, current affairs, and sports and entertainment programs of sportspeople, musicians, actors etc who have been reconstructed into 'larger than life' characters by the mass media. How is this done, and for what purposes? Should we criticise the media for creating and constructing 'myths' about people who may be as 'normal' as ourselves?
- From the above activity, write a short story about the effect of sudden public fame on a young sportsperson, musician or actor, and the intrusions into their personal lives by the media.

SELECTED REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Books

- Patsy Adam-Smith, **Australian Women at War**, Nelson, 1984
- Michael Andrews, **Australia and the Pacific War**, Dreamweaver Books, 1985
- Graeme Atkinson, **100 Great Australian Olympians**, The Five Mile Press, revised edition, 1999
- Christopher Baker, **Depressions: 1890s, 1930s—A Social History**, OUP, 1982
- Michael Cannon, **The Human Face of the Great Depression**, self-published, 1996
- Hugh V. Clarke, **The Broke and the Broken: Life in the Great Depression**, Boolarong Publications, 1982
- Harry Gordon, **Australia and the Olympic Games**, UQP, 1994
- Sally Gordon et al (eds), **The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Equestrian Sports**, Pelham Books, 1982
- Sally J. Gordon, **The Rider's Handbook**, New Burlington Books, London, c. 1980
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- Robert Hillman, **The Kokoda Trail**, Echidna Books, 2003
- Joan Palmer, **Our Solo: Bill Roycroft's Gold Medal Horse**, Joan A. Palmer, 1982
- Joanna Penglase and David Horner, **When the War Came to Australia: Memories of the Second World War**, Allen & Unwin, 1992
- John Ross, Garrie Hutchinson and Margaret Geddes (eds), **Australia's Olympic Century: All the Games in Pictures**, Ironbark, 2nd edition, Sydney, 1998
- Jack Scott, **A Fair Crack of the Whip: Embers from an Era**, Mimosa Press, 1984 (Includes descriptions of rabbiting, the Great Depression, World War Two in New Guinea, show and rodeo riding, and living rough on the land—similar to Bill Roycroft's life story.)
- Rosalind Smallwood, **Hard to Go Bung: World War II Soldier Settlement in Victoria 1945-1962**, Hyland House, 1992
- David Wallechinsky, **The Complete Book of the Olympics**, 2000 edition, Hardie Grant Books, 2000

Websites

- The Great Depression in Australia
- Trinity College web links to many sites: <http://trinitylibrary.trinity.wa.edu.au/year6/AustraliathroughthedeCADES>
- The role of the Salvation Army: <http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/en/Who-We-Are/History-and-heritage/Century-of-care/>
- Article on the rise of socialism by Terry Symonds: www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/lang.htm

■ Rabbit trappers in Australia

ABC Far West NSW: <https://open.abc.net.au/explore/61254>

Poems about rabbit trappers (see poems 414 and 416):
<http://www.krackatinni.net.au/Giggle%20Ya%20Guts%20Out4.htm>

■ Australia and World War Two

Australian War Memorial: www.awm.gov.au/atwar/ww2.htm

Australian Army (links to World War Two history and much more):
www.army.gov.au

Biography of Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey: <https://www.awm.gov.au/people/P10676218/>

Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop: <http://hellfire-pass.commemoration.gov.au/surviving-the-camps/weary-dunlop.php>

Peter Dunn's Australia@War: <http://ozatwar.com>

■ Australian soldier settlements after World Wars 1 and 2

Department of Primary Industries—The Virtual Exhibition:
<http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/4348632>

Rockhampton & District Historical Society article by John Fletcher
www.rockhampton.qld.gov.au/rdhs/documents/warservicelandsettlement.doc

■ Olympic Games

Official website of the Olympic Movement:
www.olympic.org/uk/index_uk.asp

State Library of NSW—Olympic Games:
<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection-items/sydney-during-olympic-games-2000>

ABC News Online—Olympics—Sports—Sydney 2000 equestrian:
www.abc.net.au/news/olympics/sports/equestrian.htm

■ Animal welfare

Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals:
www.rspca.org.au/news__info/articles.htm

Endurance riding—the Quilty:
<http://aera.asn.au/~qera/startingout/history.htm>

■ Horses—fiction and non-fiction stories and poetry

'Banjo' Paterson's poetry:
<http://users.tpg.com.au/thegrey/Masters.htm>

E-text of **Black Beauty: The Autobiography of a Horse** by Anna Sewell:
www.literatureproject.com/black-beauty

PBS Nature—Horses: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/horses-introduction/3153/>

Pegasus, the Flying Horse—illustrated page retelling the ancient Greek myth: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pegasus>



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