



WM·S·HART
IN
HELL'S HINGES



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May 3 Sunday at 2pm Hell's Hinges (1916) with William S Hart

Live music with Mauro Colombis

Metcalfe Auditorium, State Library NSW. 64 minutes

Reverend Robert Henley and his sister Faith arrive in the lawless frontier town of Hell's Hinges, intent on reforming its amoral citizens. Local saloon keeper and deep-dyed villain Silk Miller, realizing that a temperate populace would be bad for business, discredits the preacher by ordering a dancehall girl to seduce and denounce him. But Miller hasn't reckoned on interference from his former accomplice, notorious gunfighter Blaze Tracy, who has fallen in love with Faith and becomes an avenging angel on her behalf.

By 1916, former stage actor Hart was already established as a Western star, but the unexpected box-office success of *Hell's Hinges* took his career to another level. Although he had portrayed reformed outlaws before, something about Blaze Tracy resonated powerfully with moviegoers - so much so that he would play variations of the character in most of his subsequent films. But Hart's performance wasn't the only exemplary thing about *Hell's Hinges*: C. Gardner Sullivan's story brought Biblical allusion to sagebrush sagas, and its apocalyptic, fire-and-brimstone climax rocked audiences accustomed to tamer resolutions in Westerns.

Tickets \$30/ \$25 at the website home page right hand side or call 0419 267 318.

Hell's Hinges, Hart's sixth feature for Ince, ranks with Cecil B. DeMille's 1914 version of *The Virginian* as the most famous early Western feature. It bears small resemblance to later Hollywood formulas. The town known as "Hell's Hinges"—"a good place to 'ride wide of'"—is a wild frontier settlement. In later films, such a town would be tamed by a lone hero who would bring law and set the community on its path to civilization. *Hell's Hinges* has nothing of that optimism.

As in most of his films, Hart in *Hell's Hinges* plays a "bad" but reformable man, who first reads the Bible entranced, cigarette and liquor at hand. He is not merely a "loner" but deeply alone, even when sporting a smile and drinking with the town boss in his huge saloon, "Silk Miller's Palace of Joy." The film's structure is surprising. Hart is not introduced until more than ten minutes into it, and there is little resembling "action" until the halfway point. Initially the focus is a New York minister (in a convincingly foolish performance by Jack Standing), who arrives out west and violates propriety to an extent never allowed men of the cloth in later Hollywood films. He takes to drinking, sleeps with the town whore, and torches his own church before dying by a stray

gunshot. The town's pious citizens are "a drop of water in a barrel of rum." From its measured start, *Hell's Hinges* builds to a nightmarish intensity, "while evil and madness join hands in the triumph of victory," as an intertitle puts it. Hart's character arrives back in town in time only to make the last judgment.

Most of the film was directed by Hart himself (from early September to late October 1915), although as usual he left screen credit to a collaborator. The longstanding dispute about how active a hand Thomas Ince took in his productions—he is said to have overseen the burning of the town here—misses the point about his innovation: Ince pioneered the producer-centred division-of-labour system in Hollywood and thus was able to supervise several films simultaneously. By the time of *Hell's Hinges*, Ince and Hart had moulded a regular team, including scriptwriter C. Gardner Sullivan (who also wrote Hart's first feature, *The Bargain* [1914], and final film, *Tumbleweeds* [1925]), co-star Clara Williams (also from *The Bargain*), and cinematographer Joseph August (whose shadowed expressionism for John Ford in *The Informer* [1935] and *They Were Expendable* [1945] is anticipated in the smoke-shrouded silhouettes ending this film). The cast also includes Louise Glaum (as the prostitute Dolly), a minor siren who would star in 1920 films. Future silent idol John Gilbert can be glimpsed as a rowdy cowboy, a moustache masking his mere sixteen years.

Like all the best silent films, *Hell's Hinges* is extreme—extremely sentimental in its Victorian vision of the instantaneous effect of a "good" woman on Hart's "bad" man, and extremely harsh in its barren look and ethical judgments. Ultimately it hasn't the slightest interest in the Western's standard theme of civilization's advance via America's westward progress. The pious opening turns out to be a ploy to cover the film's Old Testament soul. Universal damnation is deserved, and Hell opens to swallow the town. In what the *New York Press* review called "a truly Gehenna-like finish," Hart finds humanity lacking and saves only himself and one good woman, while even the town's former churchgoers are left to wander the desert sands. *Hell's Hinges* anticipates more the spirit of such Clint Eastwood films as *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *Unforgiven* (1992) than of anything intervening in Hollywood. — Scott Simmon

At the same time, since this is an unusual Western, especially for its emphasis on religious elements, I drew from the rich heritage of church music that then circulated. Some of this repertoire will easily be recognized, such as "Lead Kindly Light" and Handel's so-called "Largo"—both included in virtually every piano anthology of the period under the category of "religion." Others are more remote from current practice but well suited to the film in both style and message. The rather stern hymn "Once to Every Man and Nation" (Lowell [1845], Williams, 1890), for example, underscores the film's emphasis on those defining moments of moral choice, when one enters the ranks of the damned or the elect.

Then, too, the score includes many secular and gentler examples of Americana, among them a wonderfully appropriate and concise cowboy love song with these lyrics: "When the curtains of night are pinned back by the stars, and the beautiful moon sweeps the sky, I'll remember you, Love, in my prayers." If any tune can claim to "speak" for the ruggedly silent yet poetic William S. Hart, this may be it.

Finally, my goal was to transform and merge these many pieces into a rapidly moving river of narrative—one that reflects the film's landscape of towns, deserts, churches, and saloons, as well as its rising tides of fiery violence and redeeming love. —Martin Marks. National Film Preservation Foundation





See review at http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/cteq/hells_hinges/

