
VICTOR ANDREW MCLAGLEN

Police Officer, Prospector, Soldier, Boxer, Movie Star

*Written & researched by John Burchill
Winnipeg Police Museum*



Victor McLaglen, picture postcard. Author's collection, J. Burchill

One of the first exhibits a visitor encounters when entering the Winnipeg Police Museum is a display honouring Academy Award-winner Victor McLaglen,¹ an actor in more than 120 movies and TV shows who starred alongside the likes of Cary Grant, John Wayne, Orson Welles, Boris Karloff, Henry Fonda, Bob Hope, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Ava Gardner, Shirley Temple, Marlene Dietrich, and even a young Clint Eastwood, to name a few.

Between his many adventures, Victor served as a member of the Winnipeg Police from June 11, 1907, to September 9, 1907.

Born in London, England, in 1886, Victor left home at fourteen to join the British Army with the intention of fighting in the Second Boer War in South Africa, following in the footsteps of his much-admired older brother, Frederick.²

However, with his father's intervention, Victor was instead stationed with the Life Guards at Windsor Castle. Four years later, after turning 18, Victor left for Canada, where he did farm labour, worked as a prospector, toured in circuses and vaudeville shows, worked as a constable, and often competed in both wrestling and boxing matches as a professional prizefighter.

Frederick, having returned from South Africa in 1903, where he served with the Royal Garrison Artillery, No. 10 Mountain Battery, joined the local police force and married Minnie Kettley in 1904. Two years later, Frederick travelled to Winnipeg and joined the Winnipeg Police on August 3, 1906. His wife and young daughter followed him to Winnipeg in November 1906. The couple would have three more children, all born in Winnipeg between 1908 and 1910.

¹ 1936 Best Actor in a Leading Role for *The Informer*. Also nominated in 1953 for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for *The Quiet Man*.

² Victor was one of eight brothers and one sister, all of whom were well over six feet in height. Frederick was the oldest, born in 1881, followed by Sydney (1884); Arthur (1888); Lewis (1890); Clifford (1892); Lily (1893); Cyril (1899); and Kenneth (1901).

What drew Frederick to Winnipeg is unknown. However, with more than 7,000 Canadians serving in South Africa between 1899 and 1902, Frederick may have encountered many who had gone to or come from Winnipeg.³



Lord Strathcona's Horse of the Royal Canadian Regiment leaving Winnipeg for the Second Boer War in South Africa. With permission, iStock.com/PowerofForever.

Shortly before Frederick's arrival in Winnipeg, Herbert Anderson and W.O. Edmunds opened Happyland sports and amusement park on May 23/24, 1906. The park was situated on about 13 hectares (32 acres) of land along Portage Avenue, between Aubrey and Dominion streets, extending south to the Assiniboine River.

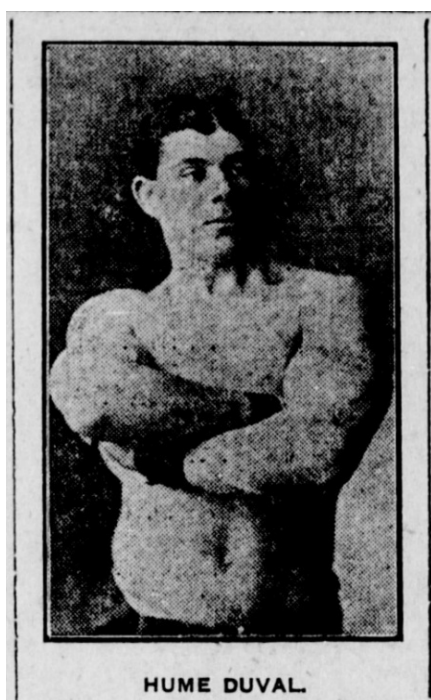
Happyland contained many attractions, including picnic grounds, tea gardens, a figure-eight roller coaster, an 80-foot-high circular swing, a vaudeville stage, a restaurant, a rifle range, a dance hall, boats, a miniature steam railway, and grandstands with seating for up to 8,000 people that hosted the Winnipeg Maroons baseball team. Opening attendance was estimated at up to 44,000 people.⁴

³ Future Chief of Police, George Smith, also came to Canada after serving in the South African War with the First Scottish Horse, joining the Winnipeg Police on February 8, 1905. Others who served in South Africa at the time include Henry Green, who spent four years with the London Metropolitan Police and one year with the South African Police before joining the WPF on May 7, 1904; and James Gray who joined the WPF on October 5, 1906, after service with the Lord Lovats Scouts and one year with the Natal Mounted Police in South Africa.

⁴ Historic Sites of Manitoba: Happyland (Winnipeg). Online <https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/sites/happyland.shtml>. Sherburn Street and Garfield Street were not built until the 1920s after the park was torn down and the land sold to developers.



Happyland Park, May 24, 1906. Rob McInnes postcard collection, City of Winnipeg Archives.



Winnipeg Tribune, December 18, 1907

The park hosted big bands, circuses, singers, vaudeville acts, moving pictures, comedy sketches, and eventually boxing and wrestling matches. Besides his brother already living in here, as the largest Canadian city west of Toronto, the bright lights of Winnipeg would likely have been a big draw for Victor as well.

During late May and early June of 1907, Hume Duval was a draw at Happyland Park, giving wrestling, jiu-jitsu, and muscular-posing exhibitions. Duval, promoted as a “*young Hercules*”, the “*strongest man of his weight in the world*”, and a “*wrestling wonder*”, challenged anyone in the city to wrestle him in either the Jiu-Jitsu, catch-as-can-catch or Greco-Roman styles, offering \$20 to anyone who could remain on the mat with him for 15 minutes.⁵

Duval even advertised \$20 to the owner of any team of horses capable of pulling his arms apart. Such public exhibitions of showmanship and physicality were common ways to draw crowds to travelling carnival shows.

⁵ Hume Duval was a stage name. In Victor’s autobiography, *Express to Hollywood* (1934), he declines to divulge Duval’s real name, stating only that he went on to become a successful businessman, and that disclosing his carnival past may be injurious to his career.

HAPPYLAND
THE CITY OF FUN

THIS WEEK
YOUNG TOM SHARKEY
The Wrestling Wonder, Will Meet
All Comers.

CONFETTI CARNIVAL
WINNIPEG CITY BAND

Owing to Numerous Requests
DANCING IN THE ROLLER RINK
The Greatest Week of the Season

ADMISSION 10C
Ladies and children free every afternoon (except holidays) from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Free every Friday afternoon and evening.

Winnipeg Voice, September 6, 1907

Within days of his arrival in Winnipeg, Fred took his brother to Happyland Park. Duval's challenge proved to be an attractive wager for the 6'5" Victor. Appearing on the circus platform in front of a large crowd, Victor held off Duval, earning the \$20 prize. The match generated considerable excitement, and Duval issued a public challenge to meet Victor again, this time for a \$200 purse. Victor accepted, and July 19 was set for the rematch.⁶

While both men gave a "fast and strenuous contest", the match ended in a draw after one hour. During the first week of September, while still employed as a constable with the Winnipeg city police, Victor (as Tom Sharkey) was contracted to appear on the stage at Happyland, wrestling all comers. Using the same publicity stunt employed by Duval, Victor offered \$20 to anyone he could not defeat in fifteen minutes. At least two men, William Keast and Jack Dewett, accepted the challenge but failed.⁷

Victor's final wrestling exhibition at Happyland closed out the week of September 6 and three days later he resigned his position with the Winnipeg Police, having served on the force for less than three months. He packed his bags and headed to Victoria, British Columbia, and then to Seattle, Washington, where he set himself up as a boxer. He won his first fight in January 1908 against Emil Schock, and then continued up and down the west coast becoming the "Heavyweight Champion of the Pacific Coast". This led him to the opportunity to fight Jack Johnson, in a 6-round exhibition bout at the Vancouver Athletic Club on March 10, 1909.⁸

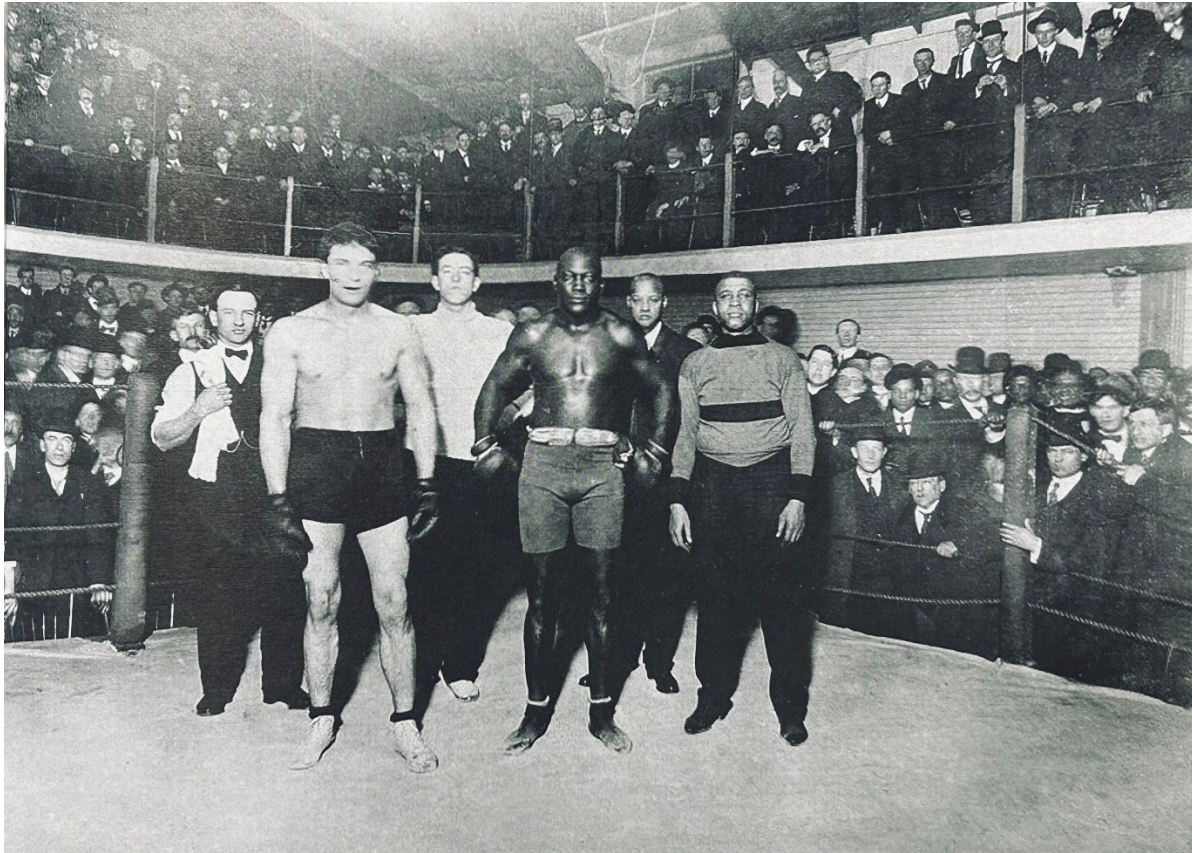
Johnson had recently been crowned the Heavyweight Champion of the World on December 26, 1908, after beating Canadian Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia. The exhibition match with Victor was the first before Johnson's title defence on May 19, 1909, against 'Philadelphia' Jack O'Brien at the National Athletic Club in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he retained his World Heavyweight Championship.

After the fight Victor decided to return to Winnipeg. He had received a note from Hume Duval inviting him to come and visit. On his return, he notes in his autobiography, that "*Winnipeg's sporting fraternity were obviously glad to see me back. They had taken my rise on the fistic ladder as a compliment to their own ability to chose scrappers for Happyland Park, and a number of fights were offered me*" (page 154). His first big fight was against Ed Parker, ex-champion of the British Army and Navy at the School of Physical Cluture on May 18, 1909.

⁶ Victor fought Duval under the name of Tom Sharkey, just 3 days away from starting with the Winnipeg Police and a month into the job for his second match. As the pay for a new police officer in Winnipeg was about \$60 per month, a potential payoff of \$20 for 15 minutes of work was well worth the gamble.

⁷ "Closing of Happyland", Winnipeg Tribune, September 7, 1907. Also see Winnipeg Tribune, September 5, 1907.

⁸ Victor was paid \$900 for the fight. Using the CPI Inflation Calculator, \$900 (US) in 1909 is equivalent in purchasing power to about \$33,000.00 (US) today. The dollar had an average inflation rate of 3.13% per year between 1909 and today, producing a cumulative price increase of 3,581.10%.



Jack Johnson's March 10, 1909, exhibition bout with Victor McLaghlen
Reprinted with permission, Heritage House, 2000. Vancouver and Beyond, 1900-1914 postcard book, p. 59

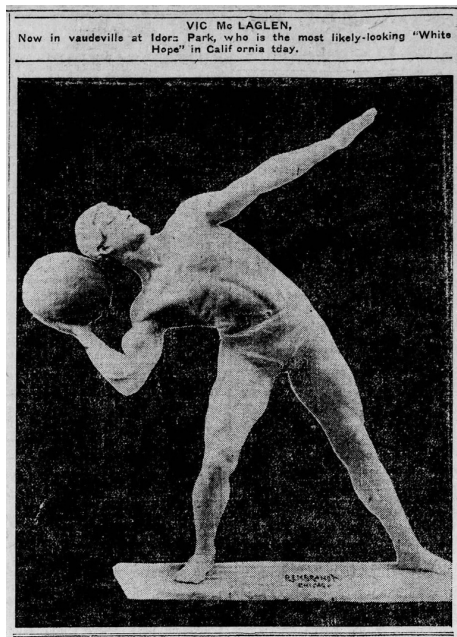
HAPPYLAND
LADIES' NIGHT
Ladies and Children Free.
NEW STADIUM
On Saturday Evening.
McLaglen to Throw a Team in
One Hour.
TOM MARKS DRAMATIC CO.
June 5th See the Big Race,
ST. YVES vs. MARSH
MISS KITTY DALE
Sings Every Night Accompanied
by
BARROWCLOUGH'S BAND
Trick Bicycle Acts on Free
Platform.
All New Side Shows.

Victor participated in a number of boxing fights and wrestling matches while he was back in Winnipeg, including one arranged by Duval in a dramatic return to Happyland, where he would wrestle an entire football team. He successfully threw out the eight players within an hour. It was a feat he had accomplished several times before.

THREW EIGHT FOOTBALLERS.
In the handicap wrestling match at Happyland last evening Vic McLaglen made good. He was to throw the members of an entire football team within an hour. Only eight opponents turned up and McLaglen disposed of these well within the stipulated time.

Winnipeg Tribune, June 5, 1909

In July the C.W. (Charles Wallace) Parker Shows came through Manitoba and both Duval and Victor decided to join Parker's traveling circus and toured for a year up and down the west coast. While their act always involved wrestling or boxing, he "*loved the flicker of the gloves, the tap of feet on the canvas, the snort of breath as the punches beat home*" (page 171), over wrestling. Eventually the pair went their separate ways and Victor teamed up with his brother, Arthur, to form a vaudeville act called "The Romano Brothers: The World's Great Exponents of Physical Culture Grecian Art." They brothers would coat themselves with a silvery cream, and pose as Greek statues, or recreate famous fight scenes.



Victor Posing as Marble Statue
Oakland Enquirer, August 29, 1912

The brothers traveled all over the world, including the United States, China, Australia, Tahiti, Fiji, and Ceylon. Victor was even a fitness coach to the Rajah of Akolkot in Bombay, India (page 190-93). As Victor later explained in his autobiography *"A man had one life to live and one world to live it in. The most he could hope to do with it was to sample that world and its sensations to the full knowing that every new country and thrill he struck was another tweak to the beard of time"* (page 163). They returned to Winnipeg to fight in 1910 and 1911, as did Fred in 1913 and 1915.

While in Cape Town, South Africa, on his vaudeville tour, Victor learned that World War I had broken out in Europe. Along with his brother, he returned to England and enlisted in the Middlesex regiment. With *"some rough and ready sense of showmanship"*, his boxing name and carnival experience in Canada made him a useful recruiting platform.

Victor was subsequently transferred Cheshire battalion and sent to Mesopotamia (Iraq), where he served as a Captain. After the war ended, he was appointed Assistant Provost Marshal (head of Military Police) for the city of Baghdad, where he was charged with the maintenance of order and other police functions. His most serious task during the war, he said in his autobiography, *"was to attempt to check the enemy espionage behind our own lines"* (page 214-215):

When I arrived in Busra [sic Basra]⁹ ... I found myself put in charge of the civil and military police there. This job became my chief work in the Army.

The lot of a policeman had often been mine, and I found the work similarly interesting, for the whole of that straggling front up above us was being combed by a highly-organized enemy intelligence service.

The most important of all my jobs was to attempt to sift this espionage to the source, and stop, if I could, this leakage of Allied secrets into the Turkish lines.

...

When we took Bagdad I was Assistant Provost-Marshal, and my most serious task, as before was to attempt to check the enemy espionage system behind our own lines.

Dep. Asst. Prov. Marshal (Cl. FF).—Lt. V. A. de B. McLaglen, 10th Midd^x. R., T.F., and relinquishes the temp. rank of Capt. 4th Mar. 1919.

London Gazette, June 24, 1919

⁹ Basra or Basrah is a port city in southern Iraq. The city is situated along the Shatt al-Arab river that empties into the Persian Gulf. Built in 636 as a military camp, Basra experienced numerous ruling shifts. In 1526 it came under Portuguese control and later fell under the control of the Ottomans as part of the Basra Eyalet, one of the provinces comprising Ottoman Iraq. During World War I, British forces captured Basra in 1914. It was incorporated into Mandatory Iraq, under the framework Mandate for Mesopotamia after 1921, which later became the independent Kingdom of Iraq in 1932.

After he was demobilized, he attempted to resume his boxing career but was given a substantial acting role in *The Call of the Road* (1920) by producer I.B. Davidson, who would produce him again in *The Gay Corinthian* (1924). He became a popular leading man in British silent films and was offered the lead role in the American film, *The Beloved Brute* (1924) directed by J. Stuart Blackton (who had previously directed him in *The Glorious Adventure* (1922)).

Several successful films followed and Raoul Walsh's *What Price Glory?* (1926), made him a star in the United States. He had many roles where he played to his strengths, mirroring his own life experiences as a fighter, boxer, soldier, and ... police officer – such as Detective Capt. T.R. McKinley in *Guilty as Hell* (1932) and *Murder at the Vanities* (1934) where he played police lieutenant Bill Murdock.



The Sphere, September 17, 1932, as the police chief in *Guilty as Hell*



Victor plays a Russian military spy, Colonel Kranau, alongside Malene Dietrich in *Dishonored* 1931.
Picture postcard. Author's collection, J. Burchill

In 1936 Victor won the Academy Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for *The Informer*. He was also nominated in 1953 for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for *The Quiet Man*. Other than on the big screen, there is no record that Victor returned to Winnipeg. He died on November 7, 1959, and his cremated remains are interred at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale, California.



Fred McKay (McLaglen),
August 2, 1913, Winnipeg Tribune

Not to be forgotten, Frederick remained with the Winnipeg Police until April 21, 1908. He left the police force to work as a bartender and focus his time and efforts making money on boxing and wrestling as “Fred McKay” in Winnipeg and throughout North America (often promoting his background as a Winnipeg “cop”).

On August 11, 1913. Frederick was knocked out in the third round of a scheduled 12-round match by Carl Morris at the Winnipeg Auditorium. Although Frederick made some attempt at continuing, Deputy Police Chief Newton, who was in the stands, called the match.

Frederick wanted a rematch against Morris, which he got in Baltimore on March 10, 1915. Now hailing from New York, Frederick went down in one punch, with fans calling it a fix. The Canton Daily News called it “a burlesque boxing sketch” between “the actors,” and the Jacksonville Daily Reflector called it “monumental theatre.”¹⁰

His last recorded fight was in December 1915 before he joined the army, serving as 2nd Lieutenant in the 3rd Lancashire Fusiliers during World War 1. Wounded in South Africa, he was transferred to St George’s Hospital, London, where he died of “blackwater fever”.¹¹ He was posthumously awarded the British War and Victory Medals.

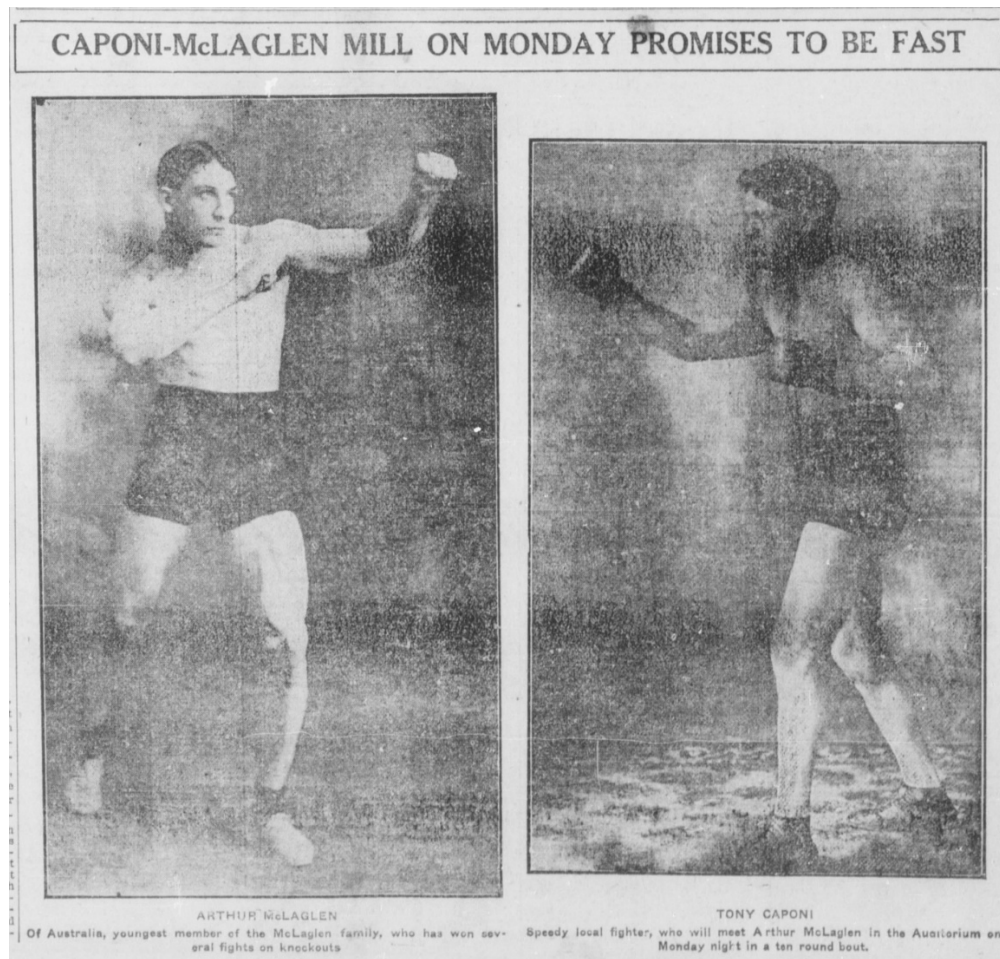


Fred McKay, “the Winnipeg Cop”.
The Cleveland Leader, July 2, 1913.

¹⁰ Whether or not Frederick was “acting”, Morris would go on to fight Jack Dempsey three times in 1917/1918, just before the latter became the American Heavyweight Boxing Champion from 1919 to 1926.

¹¹ Blackwater fever is a severe complication of the malaria infection in which the Plasmodium parasites (transmitted by mosquitoes) cause the red blood cells to burst in the bloodstream (hemolysis).

Although never a police officer, Arthur traveled the world with Victor and made several appearances on Winnipeg's boxing and wrestling circuit. Using his vandyke skills he also became an actor, known for *King of the Wild* (1931), *Black Cargoes of the South Seas* (1928) and *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927). He died on January 29, 1972, in Los Angeles County, California, USA.



Arthur McLaglen v. Tony Caponi, at the Winnipeg Auditorium, Winnipeg Tribune, August 6, 1910

Victor's other brothers Cyril, Kenneth, Clifford, and Leopold (Sydney) all had acting roles to a lesser or greater extent, while his son Andrew (1920-1914) had a long and distinguished career directing films and television, including several with his father, including John Ford's *The Quiet Man*, in which he was the second assistant director.

While it would be fascinating to interview Victor today as part of my series on Behind the Badge, to learning how his brother Frederick, policing in Winnipeg, and his start at Happyland Park, may have influenced his later career, we do have the opportunity to see and hear from Victor himself on the show "*Its Your Life: Victor McLaglen*", which premiered on NBC television in 1954. In the program, the host takes Victor through a retrospective of his life with appearances by colleagues, friends, and family.¹²

¹² Now available on Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ29_SQPyZM&t=3s.