



Pardoning Our Past? – ‘Breaker’ Morant and Today’s Australia

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The petitions committee of Australia’s House of Representatives met on Monday 15 March, to consider whether to press for a pardon for Harry ‘Breaker’ Morant and Peter Handcock. Executed for killing prisoners during the Second South African War (1899-1902), these men – and their comrade George Whitton, whose death sentence was commuted – were found guilty at a military court martial notable for several legal and procedural inconsistencies; a trial made famous by Kit Denton’s novel *The Breaker* (1973), Bruce Beresford’s film *Breaker Morant* (1980), and more recently by Nick Bleszynski’s sympathetic popular history *‘Shoot Straight, You Bastards’* (2002).

Morant and his fellows were certainly denied certain rights which would otherwise have been available to troops in their position. But is the lack of procedural nicety and due process evident in a 108-year-old court case a reason to pardon men whom everyone agrees shot and killed declared enemies who surrendered to them, and shot and killed at least one civilian who witnessed the atrocities...?

No.

Pardoning Morant and Co would achieve nothing more than assuaging a false sense of wounded Australian pride, based on a supposed victimisation by our former ‘imperial masters’.

Indeed, much of the case for Morant’s pardon seems to stem not from reasoned historical or legal analysis, but from the emotion and crude, anti-British, Australian nationalism evoked by the Beresford film. The respected Navy Commander and lawyer James Unkles – the chief motive force in the move for Morant’s pardon – has himself noted the galvanising effect of *Breaker Morant* on his thinking, and this suggests that even the best-educated and most intellectually-rigorous of Australians suffer from serious problems when relating to their history.

One key problem is the tendency to engage with Australian history through fictionalised filmic representations, and taking those representations at face-value. But the film *Breaker Morant* tells us far less about Australia’s Boer War than it does about the later 1970s and early 1980s. *Breaker Morant* is the product of a period when the meaning of Australia’s

British heritage was subject to intense questioning and sustained criticism in the wake of the independently-minded Whitlam era. The 1970s saw a violent reaction against the Anglophilia of the Menzies period, which contributed to a raft of reappraisals of our 'special relationship' with Britain, in popular culture as well as within the academy (Gavin Souter's *Lion and Kangaroo: the Initiation of Australia*, 1976, for instance). Just as in Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* (1981), in *Breaker Morant* it is 'the Poms' who are depicted as Australia's *real* enemy: the bumbling, but brutal arch-manipulators, who use their colonial subjects to do their dirty work!

Moreover, the film – and much of the media coverage surrounding this campaign for pardon – neatly downplays the fact that a great many of the Australians who fought in the dirty, imperialist war that was South Africa, 1899-1902, did so out of a sense of their own *Britishness*, that is completely foreign to contemporary audiences of *Breaker Morant*. They were not merely downtrodden colonial subjects, but active participants in the building of an empire many of them felt to be their own. This seems to be lost on those who use the film as their only real engagement with the issues raised by the Morant pardon movement, who would benefit from a more critical historical perspective on the issues.

Not merely is the Morant story skewed in this way, but several recent newspaper reports are built on sloppy research, and outright errors of historical fact. A great many of the reports in the Fairfax press assert that Morant and other Australian colonial troops were 'drafted' by the British. They were not – all the Australian servicemen in South Africa were volunteers. Again, the notion of the oppressed colonial subject seems to carry more weight than any reasoned historical analysis. A great deal of the analysis that has been done seems to be built on uncritical readings of '*Shoot Straight, You Bastards*', or conspiracy theories lacking in any real evidence. Such are the dangers of basing one's research on supposition and pop culture; something the highly respected military historian Craig Wilcox (author of *Australia's Boer War*, 2002), has been at pains to point out.

It seems the politicians are just as guilty of revisionism as are the lawyers, film-makers and journalists. It was former National Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer who first gave credence to idea of a pardon. Ahead of the debate in the House petitions committee, Labor Attorney-General Robert McClelland has already forwarded the petition for pardon to the British government. Liberal MPs Julian McGauran and David Hawker have also publicly backed the move – no doubt with an eye to the effects on their nationalist credibility should it succeed. It should be noted that either way – whether the British government grants, or refuses to grant, the pardons – much political and nationalist capital will be made out of the unfolding debate. Either way, small-minded Australian nationalists will again be able to paint the whole affair as yet another instance of our oppression by the Old Dart.

That Australians should be able to construct a sense of national identity free from crude Anglophobia is reason enough to deny Morant and Co the pardon sought by Unkles and Co. But the implications of historical revisionism are even more pressing than this.

As a recent letter to the *Melbourne Age* pointed out: What kind of message would pardoning these men send to the troops currently engaged on active service in Afghanistan, another theatre of war where the line between civilian and soldier are blurred? What legal precedent might it set should (God forbid) Australian (or British) troops be found to have committed atrocities against the Afghan population, or even against Taliban prisoners taken in the course of battle? What impact would a pardon for Morant and Co have on Australia’s reputation abroad?

For all those observers of the case, one is struck by the irony that independent Australia seems to have taken a far less mature approach to the whole issue, and we are now looking to our former ‘mother country’ for guidance. If the extent of historical understanding and public debate over the Morant pardon is built on sensationalist cinema, conspiracy theories and semi-fictional histories, perhaps we aren’t ready to cut the apron strings just yet, and forge our own political and cultural path, independent of Britain. At this stage, one can only hope that the British government will take a more reasoned approach to the petition than our own, and consider not merely the legal and procedural niceties of the case when making its decision, but also its wider policy implications.

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