

Author Q&A – “Shoot Straight You Bastards!”

The following Q&A is an abridged transcript of an interview done with Rob Willis for the National Library Canberra on 14/10/2006. A more detailed interview about the author, his life and his work is available in the archives of the National Library.

Q: Was “Shoot Straight You Bastards!” your first book?

Yes, it was originally going to be a documentary film. It was in development for years, but that fell over near the last hurdle. A publisher at Random House had read an article about the project in *The Bulletin* and asked me if I'd considered turning it into a book. I thought why not?

Q: How did you make the transition from film- maker to author?

Very easily. Raising money for television documentaries has become so long- winded and wearying and when Random House put their money on the table and said just do it I did. It was great, just being free to be creative, no committees trying to shape your story to their vision, just you and your word processor.

I'd have to be honest and admit I'd never written a book before or even attended a writing course, but I had 20 years experience writing documentary and advertising scripts and I tapped into that experience. Structure and story are also strong elements in these mediums and as the subject was non- fiction it helped me organise the mass of information into a sequence of events that became the chapters. I also read a lot of books that dealt with similar characters and stories and learned how they presented their stories and the various techniques I might employ.

Q: How would you describe your writing style?

Mongrel.... It was part film script, part dramatic narrative with a bit of old- fashioned history thrown in. I didn't want to write a conventional history book, but to make it readable and exciting, just as the story appeared to me. I mixed it up a bit – decided not to put “perhaps”, “maybe”, or “it could be argued” where I came to section where we had some of the facts, but not all and were required to fill in the gaps. Instead I gathered up all the facts I had, put it into a dramatic

narrative and used my intuition, based on my detailed research, to speculate. I put these sections in italics and told the reader that these sections were not purely historical. The technique seemed to work well for the people who read it, though the purists were mortified.

Q: What first interested you in the “Breaker” Morant story?

I'd seen the film years before when I was still living in the UK. Of course, having never been to Australia or having no knowledge of Australian history, I didn't quite get it. However, coming from Scotland a tale of English perfidy was noting new. Once I'd moved to Australia I began to understand the significance of the story. A fellow film-maker told me the trial of Morant and Handcock was “crook” and I had a look at it. To my surprise there was a lot of information not yet published, largely thanks to a network of enthusiasts who had been moved by the film to dig deeper. The advent of e-mail, internet and the digitisation of archival records also made international information easily accessible.

Morant was also a very attractive character, part of that extraordinary British Diaspora who burst out into the world and led rollicking, extraordinary lives. That was the thing that was missing from the film – the story of his life. It never explored who he was, where he came from or how he came to be in that situation? In the end, I felt that the tragedy of his personal life was as compelling as the infamous trial that saw him executed.

Q: It sounds like you found much to admire in Harry Morant.

I did. He was a very handsome, charismatic man who people couldn't help liking despite his faults. He was also a rare mix of roughhouse and poet. He was a cattle drover and legendary horse “breaker” – the best there was - and in Australia at that time that was saying something. Yet, he was also capable of beautiful love poems and wonderful lyrical poetry. If you look around at his peers Lawson, Ogilvie and Patterson, they were poets who could wax lyrical about the bush, but none could claim to have lived the life Morant did.

While on trial for shooting Boer prisoners and on the day of his subsequent execution, Morant exhibited incredible courage. He refused to beg for his life or bend to the British. At one point they offered to let him off if he would dob in Major Lenehan who was his C.O and good mate. Morant refused, stood up at the trial and told the truth – that Kitchener had given orders to “take no prisoners” and that they were

the orders he followed. On the day of his execution he faced down the guns and uttered those famous last words "Shoot Straight you Bastards!" The rest of us could only dream about that kind of courage.

I thought that in many ways he was one of life's unfortunates. No matter how hard he battled his bad luck and his personal failings always seemed to trip him up and he was the victim of quite a few cruel twists of fate.

Q: Did the controversy surrounding trial also draw you to the story?

Of course, the courts martial was also a major area of interest for me. The whole process has been under a cloud since the day they were executed and British courts martial were not known for their impartiality in such matters, as World War 1 testified. There were so many unanswered questions and loose ends that needed to be tied up.

Q: Why hadn't this been done before?

I think Australian history is a curious animal. The institutions that are responsible for our history are, in my humble opinion, not concerned with the rights and wrongs of history, but maintaining the image of history that they feel is appropriate. They have an old world, imperialist world view that because we fought with Britain and America we have a sacred bond and that cannot be violated, regardless of the historical facts. Therefore, the task of discovering the truth behind the Morant and Handcock trial is left to authors, film-makers and those with an interest in history, rather than those actually paid to do it.

Q: Did writing such a detailed book involve a lot of research?

It was a massive combined effort. As I said before there is a network of researchers and I received a lot of help from them. I also travelled to UK and South Africa where I found important information about both Morant and the courts martial in various archives. It was an exhausting, exhilarating, frustrating, but, above all, fascinating journey. To this day I am still receiving new information.

Q: Do you think you proved your theory that Morant and Handcock were "Scapegoats of The British Empire"?

Yes, I do. The thing that seemed so difficult for the Australian War Memorial, The Returned Serviceman's League and the Australian

government to grasp was that it wasn't good enough for the British to be half right or to argue they had to enforce discipline in the ranks. It was a capital case, they tried and shot them – that's pretty black and white and in order for that verdict to stand it must be unimpeachable.

Q: What in your opinion was wrong with the trial?

From start to finish the whole process was corrupt. First of all Morant and Handcock were not by any stretch of the imagination the only ones in the British army or indeed their unit, the Bushveldt Carbineers, to shoot Boer prisoners. Eight Boers had been killed before Morant even arrived, yet he and Handcock were the only ones singled out. The others who should have stood accused with him were either discharged, allowed to turn King's evidence or posted overseas. It was designed to ensure no embarrassing, contrary evidence came to light during the courts martial.

The trial itself was riddled with procedural errors, including the denial of a clear case of condonation. During the trial, the Boers attacked the fort where the trial was taking place. Morant and Handcock were given guns and told to help defend their prosecutors, which they did. British military custom is that any man who performs a duty of honour will be acquitted of any charges against him. Even though there were clear precedents in the Boer War Kitchener ordered the trial to continue.

All the way through to Kitchener's reporting of the facts to London and the appeal process the men were entitled to – it was clear that someone was going to pay now that the affair had become public.

Q: Do you ever believe the matter will be resolved?

Only if there is a change of government. Liberals are predominately Monarchists and are not going to have a bar of this. That much is evident at the Eureka celebrations last year. A significant historical landmark, yet where were the government Ministers? They viewed it as "their" history ie: Labor, not our history ie: Australian. Go figure.

Q: Thank you

Pleasure.

