

## **Back To The Future**

On December 1<sup>st</sup> I will launch my second book, “You’ll Never Take Me Alive – The Life and Death of Bushranger Ben Hall” in Forbes. It is a historical fiction based on the life of the bushranger Ben Hall who plundered the central west for three years between 1863- 65 before he was killed, or murdered, as I will contend in my book, by the NSW police. Then, with the help of his great-grandson, Ben Hall jnr., I will unveil a life- size statue of him. These are momentous events, things I could barely have imagined when I arrived in Australia from Scotland just over a decade ago.

Immigrants do one of two things, bring their own history and culture and live like exiles, or assimilate. I decided on the latter course though I must confess all I knew about Australian history would have fitted onto the back of a postage stamp. Convicts, Ned Kelly, “Breaker” Morant, Aborigines in the outback and Gallipoli all registered, usually as a result of films I’d seen, but I couldn’t have placed them on a historical timeline. As a film- maker and author whose principal currency is stories I was delighted to discover Australia had a rich and exciting history.

My first commission for the ABC, a TV documentary called “Bronzed Aussie Gods” about beach culture, which no one from a nation of beach- goers had thought sufficiently interesting to explore, showed me just how little Australians knew about and celebrated their history. From cultural institutions downwards there seemed to be a strange detachment and disinterest and Australians seemed oddly content to hear other people’s stories rather than their own. Ben Hall’s story is a fantastically powerful human tale of betrayal, guilt and vengeance – “a ripper yarn” as Bryce Courtenay, another immigrant with a penchant for Australian history, was moved to say after reading it. If Ben Hall were American or British, Jesse James or Dick Turpin, his legend would have been writ large in history long ago. I found this attitude baffling because as a Polish Scot I hail from two cultures which clung to their history and identity in the face of centuries of political oppression and cultural domination.

As a boy I recall visiting to Culloden Moor, 50kms from where I grew up. Here the English redcoats under the command of “The Butcher of Cumberland” ended the Jacobites struggle to restore “Bonnie” Prince Charlie to the throne of Scotland in 1745. Wading through the waist high, sweet- smelling heather on the main battleground I heard how our ancestors (the McPhersons) were slaughtered on the battlefield and then driven from their Highland keep down onto the coast where our family have lived for the past 300 years – all so the English could raise sheep.

Another important formative experience was my first family visit to Poznan in Poland during 1970. With fire- blackened buildings, piles of rubble and bullet- holes in every wall, it looked as if World War 2 had ended the day before. Sadly, thanks to the treachery of its so- called allies, the war never ended for the Poles. The Nazis were replaced by Communists who sent dissenters to the Siberian gulags, kept food rations at starvation level for half a century and had spies listening through the thin walls as we discovered more relatives that were victims

of history. I vividly recall being shown the grey and black striped cap and shirt uncle worn by our uncle Pavel who survived in Auschwitz for two years and died of tuberculosis two days after the Americans liberated the camp. As a teenager I went to Auschwitz and lit a candle for him, an experience that again made history very personal thing for me.

As a result, I became deeply involved in the Solidarity movement during my university years. When my fellow students were stressing over late assignments, drinking beer and photocopying their backsides, I was smuggling secret documents through Checkpoint Charlie in my underpants, reasoning that even ideologically hardened Communists wouldn't go there. While I couldn't claim my underpants brought down Communism, it was my appreciation of history that moved me to do my bit.

Many other immigrants feel the same way. Recent surveys have shown that they love living in Australia, but have trouble identifying with its history and culture, which aren't strongly defined. The on- off Republican debate shows that we do have an identity problem. Are we happy being a Federated state with a Head of State that is remote in every sense? The polls say we want a Republic, but no one seems willing to grasp the nettle. Maybe we need Mel Gibson to make an Australian version of "Braveheart". Whatever may be said about its historical accuracy, it certainly restored Scottish national pride and rekindled the independence debate.

Why is there this historical vacuum? John Howard's one- man, 1950's cabaret revue has returned us to a bygone era in many respects. The palpable sense of independence, confidence and pride in being Australian I felt a decade ago has evaporated and we are cosily curled up in Britain and America's lap once again. This supplication has ensured the cultural cringe remains alive and well. I thought that like the Bunyip it was some sort of mythical creature, until I came face to face with it after my first book "Shoot Straight You Bastards!" was published.

The trial and execution of "Breaker" Morant and Peter Handcock by the British during the Boer War was a huge miscarriage of justice that would never stand up to a judicial review. Yet, the deference shown by institutions like the Returned Serviceman's League, the Australian War Memorial and the then Minister for Veteran Affairs, Dana Vale, to so-called British justice and sensitivities was sickening, as if setting the historic record straight would violate some sacred bond.

The elevation of Ben Hall to popular hero will excite a similar reaction. The prevailing, mainstream historical view of bushrangers is that they were criminals and nothing more. Most were, but some were different. The history of any nation, especially pioneer nations, is made by heroes and villains and more often by men who are a bit of both.

Bushrangers were criminals, but also a tangible manifestation of the deep social divisions in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia. The big question was would Australia just become a facsimile of England, or something different? Ben Hall and Ned Kelly, who I think had more of a social and political commitment, articulated the feelings of the common man about a corrupt system of justice and land

distribution. The local population obviously agreed – how else could have he have remained at large for three years?

So, when I get up on that podium next Thursday I will do so with pride. Let the wowsers wail, this will be a genuine piece Australian history and I'll be proud to have written a little by-line for future generations, if not for this one.

This story ends with an interesting postscript for Australians. After nearly 300 years Scotland gained devolution from England and after almost as long Poland regained its sovereignty after the collapse of Communism – proof that an interest in one's own history does pay dividends. (1,203)

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