

LESSONS OF HISTORY

Émigrés either import their own history and culture and live like exiles, or assimilate. I decided on the latter course and was delighted to discover my new home had a rich and exciting history, an opinion, strangely, not shared by Australians themselves. I found this baffling because as a Polish Scot I hail from two cultures that have clung to their history and identity in the face of centuries of real political and cultural oppression.

My first book, "Shoot Straight You Bastards!" revealed the trial and execution of "Breaker" Morant and Peter Handcock during the Boer War to be a grave miscarriage of justice and brought me face to face with the cultural cringe. I thought it was a mythical creature like the Bunyip until the Returned Serviceman's League, the Australian War Memorial and the then Minister for Veteran Affairs, Dana Vale, behaved as if I had violated some sacred bond.

This week to coincide with the launch my second book, "You'll Never Take Me Alive – The Life and Death of Bushranger Ben Hall," I will unveil a life-size statue of Ben Hall in his home-town of Forbes. The cringe will, doubtless, re-emerge as the mainstream historical view of bushrangers is that they were criminals and nothing more. Yet, the history of any country, especially pioneer nations, is shaped by heroes and villains and more often by men who are a bit of both. Ironically, were Ben Hall British or American, Jesse James or Dick Turpin, we'd know all about him. "You'll Never Take Me Alive," is also controversial for a number of other reasons

It alleges police, armed with the Felon's Apprehension Act, bearing an uncomfortable resemblance to our proposed new terror laws, murdered Ben Hall then pumped 30 bullets into his cadaver. For Victorians that grim historical postscript will be dwarfed by the revelation that New South Wales not only have the best beaches, climate, economy and AFL team, but the best bushranger. Yes, Ben Hall was the greatest bushranger in Australian history.

Modern history/ mythology has cast Ned as a revolutionary, rather than a common bushranger, who attacked the pillars of authority by robbing banks, taking on the police, writing political manifestos, burning storekeeper's ledgers and partying at the Glenrowan Inn as he waited to derail a train full of police. No one's denying Ned his place in history, but let's rewind almost two decades to when he was still in short pants.

If Ned's actions can be justified on the grounds that a policeman kissed his sister, then Ben Hall should be a saint. Well respected in the district as a hard working, land-owning father and husband, his descent into bushranging began when New South Wales police wrongly imprisoned him then burnt down his station and killed all his cattle.

Moving on to their respective careers, there are many striking similarities. The Ben Hall gang carried out more bail-ups than anyone in Australian history, including the 1862 Eugowra escort robbery, which was the Australian equivalent of the Great Train robbery. They also carried out the first ever raid on a bank, burnt storekeepers ledgers and squatters farms, bailed up Bathurst and

Canowindra where the townsfolk partied in a hotel for three days. As I described Ben Hall died spectacularly in a hail of police bullets in 1865.

When Ned rode through the streets of Deniliquin shouting "Hurrah for Ben Hall" he was only acknowledging what we in New South Wales now know to be the truth and he will have a statue to prove it. I'll stand up on that podium on Thursday 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.

As for the cringe, that won't worry Ned's supporters, but then again they're Irish, immigrants like me. (650)