

LESSONS OF HISTORY

This week, for only the second time in Australian history, I unveiled a statue to a bushranger. Ben Hall was honoured in the country town of Forbes, New South Wales. Television and talkback have been buzzing. Should we be putting up statues to bushrangers? I say yes for a number of reasons.

In Australia 1865 notions of justice were very different. Australia was a facsimile of England – ruled by landed gentry whose property and position was defended by a corrupt police, force and two houses of parliament that the common man could not vote in and ineffective land distribution laws that failed to open up good quality runs for the small farmer.

The claim that Ben Hall was driven to bushranging is often dismissed as folklore, but is borne out by historical fact. After accusing and failing to convict Ben Hall twice for bushranging, police burnt his station and left all his cattle to perish. This was acknowledged by police, who acted outside the law, and the State Premier whose defence that the act was justified because Hall was a “notorious bushranger” had absolutely no legal foundation. His life’s work ruined, the once respectable husband, father, land- owner and cattleman uttered the famous words, “I might as well have the game as the blame.”

In a prolific career that lasted from 1862- 65 the Ben Hall gang committed over 600 robberies and attacked the pillars of the establishment that had wringed him. He was the first to rob a bank, raid a police station, burn storekeeper’s ledgers and squatters farms and still found time to bail up two towns, Bathurst and Canowindra, and rob the Eugowra gold escort of £14,000, which was the Australia’s equivalent of the Great Train Robbery.

Ben Hall deserves the mantle of Australia’s greatest bushranger. Ned was still in short pants when Ben was out blazing a trail and copied many of his moves, right down to the party he held at the Glenrowan Inn while he waited to derail a train full of police. When Ned rode through the streets of Deniliquin shouting “Hurrah for Ben Hall” he was only acknowledging the truth and now has a statue to prove it.

Like Ned, Ben also died in a hail of police bullets on May 5th, 1865. After passing the Felon’s Apprehension Act - a vicious piece of legislation bearing striking similarities to the proposed 2005 anti-terror laws. In the words of the man who led the police patrol, “the air was filled with the cries of frantic Irishmen” who went “perfectly mad” as they gave Ben Hall “a good riddling.” Thirty shots were pumped into his body, many of them after he was dead. The subsequent magisterial inquiry covered up the murder... yes murder. Police could have taken him alive the night before and in going out to get him police had again flouted the law. On the day he was shot Ben Hall had not yet been declared an outlaw.

The history of nations, especially pioneer nations, was made by heroes and villains and often by men who were a bit of both. Gold changed Australia’s destiny and the big question was - were we going to be another England or something better? Thankfully, we chose the latter course and like it or not Ben Hall helped shape our history, or at least steer it in the right direction. Supported

by the common man, without whose support he could not have lasted three years, he stood up to a corrupt, self- interested order, which is something to admire, even today. (597)

Nick Bleszynski is a documentary film- maker and the author of You'll Never Take Me Alive, the life and death of bushranger Ben Hall (Dec 1, 2005 Random House) and the best selling Shoot Straight You Bastards!: The truth behind the killing of Breaker Morant" (2002 and 2003).

This article appeared in "The Adelaide Advertiser" on 7th December, 2005