

## **Author Q&A – “You’ll Never Take Me Alive”**

*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: Why did you choose Ben Hall as the subject for your second book?**

For a number of reasons. I thought Ben’s was an unusual story with lots of interesting nuances. He was the only land- owner who became a bushranger. He went to the bad as a result of a broken heart and had clearly defined grievances against the police who were led by a disgraced English aristocrat called Inspector Sir Frederick Pottinger. To me, the Ben Hall story offered a great dramatic mix and a very human story.

Secondly, I don’t think, with all due respect to the earlier books published, that his story had been really well told. Like Morant I saw Hall as an iconic Australian character, a character who greatly shaped our history although he was not strictly on the side of the law. They, to me, are infinitely more interesting characters than the straight up and down good guys because they question your attitudes, belief and morals more.

### **Q: What do you mean “not strictly on the side of the law”? He was an armed robber whose gang killed two policemen.**

The English writer Graham Greene once said, “Life is rarely black and white, mostly grey.” This is especially true of history, which is made both by heroes and villains and often by men who are a bit of both. Ben Hall was a robber, but you have to see that within the context of the times he lived. One hundred a forty years ago the world was a very different place. Notions of right and wrong and justice were very different. It would be fair to say that the gap between the police and bushrangers wasn’t so wide. People had less recourse to justice, they had no right to vote and the land was owned by the gentry who ruled the roost. The job of the police was largely to uphold the squatters rights and they behaved in a manner that would not be unacceptable today. Life was more extreme back then and when people had enough they took things into their own hands.

**Q: For your first book "Shoot Straight You Bastards!..." you chose non-fiction, but this time you used fiction. Why?**

Unlike 'The Breaker' about whom quite a lot was known and written, Ben Hall was a much more enigmatic character. Even the exact date and place of birth is a bone of contention. Ben couldn't read and write and lived in a rural area where few had education, whereas the Breaker was a poet and a journalist, mixed in a very cosmopolitan company and lived in a period where people were more literate and played out his big drama in the military, which kept lots of records. In terms of putting together the jig-saw the 'Breaker' was easier, whereas Ben was harder. His career was well documented, but his early life and his personal motivations were not. Also, despite only being a bushranger for three years he was involved in a huge number of crimes and there was a need to compress information. Fiction allowed me to more easily gather together the pieces and afforded me the freedom to create a coherent impression of the man within the legend. All up, I was very happy with the result.

**Q: Is the book based on the life of Ben Hall or purely fictional?**

While it is very solidly based on the events of his life, especially the parts dealing with his bushranging career, which were pretty well documented, I would never claim it was pure history. Too many details of his life were missing to do a non-fiction style biography. What history gives you is an outline, a rough sequence of events and I used fiction to fill in the detail of what happened next and why.

He had a remarkable career committing more robberies in three years than any other bushranger gang in history, masterminding the Eugowra escort robbery, the biggest single bail up in the colony's history and attacking the police, banks, squatters and even holding up whole towns. It would have been impossible to tell his entire story, without making the book two or three times the size, which the early drafts were, so I concentrated on the highlights and condensed time in order to make it work as a story. So, you could say based on his life, but not a true history.

**Q: Why tell the story in the first person or "I"?**

I prefer first person to the third person because it is a more intimate and full-on experience for both author and reader. You see the world through the eyes of your main character, you live his life, share his highs and lows, deliberate over his choices – like an actor I guess. It

also forces the reader and writer to ask questions about what the world was like in 1860's Australia. This is an important consideration as it would be a wrong and misleading assumption that the world today is anything like it was 140 years ago when Ben Hall was on the go. The moral choices, the systems of government and law and order, what was right and wrong were not as clearly defined and clear as they are nowadays.

This more intimate perspective forces you to work harder to inhabit the skin of the character that is the focus of your story. Nothing less than total inertia, or it won't work for your reader. With the third person there's always that distance and it can make the writer lazy, whereas when its "I" you must know everything.

I regard myself as a rigorous researcher able to mine those little nuggets of information others have missed and to use them to create intimate detail or clear definition that was perhaps lacking in earlier books. If you're not prepared to do that spadework then settle for the third person.

Of course, using the first person creates problems like perspective. If its "I" how can you know what plots are being hatched in rooms where you were not present? You find a way. Being a bushranger Ben Hall had a great spy network and I used that to place him in the rooms where the police plotted his demise.

**Q: Your book takes quite a contrary view of bushrangers to mainstream history, which views them as little more than vagabonds and thieves. What led you to that conclusion?**

To me, that was what the bushrangers were all about – railing against society's injustices. Ben's story illustrates how an ordinary man can fall from grace and end up a criminal. But it was a reluctant path, something he tried to turn away from, but he was left with no choice. The police, representing the system, destroyed his life. When you consider why he became a bushranger and the things he did its fairly obvious he was more than just a thief. I examined his actions and concluded that this was a man who was not just content to rob people, he intended to undermine the pillars of authority.

**Q: You said that Ben was illiterate, yet in the book you portray him as quite a worldly man. Why do that?**

My feeling was that although he was not educated he knew what was going on in the wider world. People talked to each other more, passed on information and wisdom by word of mouth. There were a lot of very literate people in the bush, the stations had great libraries and people's had been forged on the anvil of bitter experience. I think he would have tapped into that and known on some level that the world around him was changing. The French Revolution, the Todpuddle Martyrs, The Chartist, the American Civil War and Karl Marx had just written "The Communist Manifesto". An agenda for social change had been set and was being acted out right across the world. Australia was isolated, but not immune to these things. The Eureka Stockade, which happened during Ben's life, showed that thoughts of liberation were in the air even in Australia. His mother and father were convicts and I'd imagine they'd have strong feelings about the system that ruled their lives. Justice and land were the politics of the 1860's and I think he'd have known a thing or two about such things.

**Q: You chose to put a section on the historical research at the end of the book, why? Doesn't that blur the lines between fiction and history?**

Even though I set out to write a purely fictional book, albeit based on the outline of his life, historical fact intruded into my research, information I thought wrong to exclude. Therefore, I decided to add an Author Afterword. I suppose its like having "extras" on a DVD, you get that bit more. Also, I think the hard historical facts I added underpinned the fact that I did research the story properly and tried to include as much authentic detail as possible. Having said that, my publisher Random House and I had many debates over the wisdom of including it. My argument was that the reader deserves to know everything about the character in question and that if it made people stop and think – hey this was fiction, but not so far from the actual truth, then it was a struggle worth winning.

**Q: In the Author's Afterword you maintain that the police murdered Ben Hall and in "Shoot Straight..." you alleged that Morant and Handcock were scapegoats for Lord Kitchener. Do you set out to court controversy?**

No, I don't deliberately court controversy – these things happened in history long before I came along. When I research a subject and find things I don't back away, no matter how unpalatable they might be. That's the only honest course.

By their own admission, the police could have arrested him the evening before, but preferred to drive him into an ambush the next morning. They then claimed that despite the fact it was barely light and he was running – that every bullet hit him. The story that two of the shooting party told was that the police used his body as target practice after he was dead. Even at the time there was a great deal of disquiet about the number of bullets fired into him.

**Q: You've chosen to write about two legendary anti-heroes. Are you a champion of the underdog?**

Only the underdogs who deserve to be championed. I back the ones who have a story or character I can empathise with or have suffered some terrible injustice. Very often they have been shaped by those experiences and their "crimes" are a reaction to the wrongs done to them. I also have a soft spot for what I call "Graham Greene characters", essentially bad or weak men who realise the error of their ways and seek or earn redemption through an unselfish act or personal sacrifice.

**Q: Thanks for your time.**

No worries.