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# Say Who Made Her So: *Breaker Morant* and British Empire

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In the early morning of February 27, 1902, on a windy, barren hill in the Transvaal region of South Africa, Lieutenants Harry “Breaker” Morant and Peter J. Handcock, serving in what is now known as the South African War,<sup>1</sup> were shot by a British firing squad. The third convict, Lieutenant George Witton, was also sentenced to die, but he was given a last-minute commutation to life imprisonment and was then released five years later. What reads like fiction accurately describes the historical military execution of Morant and Handcock, officers in the British Imperial fighting unit known as the Bushveldt Carbineers. Less than 24 hours earlier, the officers had been found guilty by the British Military court of fatally shooting 14 Boer prisoners.

Over the last century, the court-martial<sup>2</sup> many people know today simply as the case of Breaker Morant has become one of the most contested in modern military history, despite its having occurred in a remote area of Africa during the tail end of a mostly unremembered war. This relatively insignificant episode has inspired more than a dozen books and articles, and served as the subject of a play and of Bruce Beresford’s 1980 docu-drama classic, *Breaker Morant*.

Why do historians and other interested parties continue to challenge the facts and issues of this case? Most likely because the courts-martial of Morant and two of his fellow Carbineers remain compelling detective stories, full of lingering questions concerning the true identities of the parties involved, the guilt of the accused, and the conduct and motives of British officialdom in the case. Moreover, national identities on several sides play a significant part in the complex scenario. The most cogent, accurate, and wide-ranging article on the subject is Hallman B. Bryant’s “‘Breaker Morant’ in Fact, Fiction and Film.” But in the more than 12 years since research for Bryant’s article was completed, new and important scholarship on Breaker has appeared, by Elizabeth J. Birmingham, Larry Bridges, and Adam Henry, in addition to several documents issued by the Australian War Memorial and the premier book-length treatment of the subject, Arthur Davey’s *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers*. The twists and turns of the labyrinthine case prove too numerous to encapsulate within a single article. But, using the most recent scholarship, this article offers a new synthesis of the available historical data, explaining how and why the events unfolded as they did. The article also explains why Beresford’s film continues to present a relevant and compelling portrait of the perennial challenges of leadership in counter-guerrilla warfare.

To some degree, the intrigue and the cloudiness of the event stem from the conflicting portrayals of Morant and the Boer War. Beresford, perhaps not wanting to deal with thorny character issues, skips over Morant’s earliest roots and begins the story *in media res*, just as the court martial opens. The director then flashes back to incidents pertinent to the trial. But Morant’s background is more relevant than the film suggests. Harry Morant—nicknamed “Breaker” in Australia because of his pre-War reputation for breaking wild horses—proved in life to be as mysterious as he has become since his death. He was born Edwin Harry Murrant, the son of a workhouse master, in Bridgewater, Somerset, England.<sup>3</sup> Yet neither a birth certificate nor baptismal records of Morant in and around Devon, where Breaker claims to have been born, can be located. Of course, the county holds no records of concealed births (if the birth

1. The South African War is also known as the Anglo-Boer War and the Boer War.
2. A court-martial is the military equivalent of a felony-level criminal trial in the civilian legal world.
3. But the Murrants at one point did reside in Devon. See *Closed File*, p. 69. See also Hallman B. Bryant. “Morant.” p.139. Oddly, Breaker enlisted in the B.V.C. under the name Henry Horland Morant. Australian War Memorial Database.

had been illegitimate, for example), and Morant may not have been baptized. In any case, Morant's writings, as well as several other narrative accounts, reveal a man who, at minimum, possessed enough formal education to have elevated his mannerisms, language, and stature. Kit Denton, in his book *Closed File*, notes that Morant's poetry, letters, and other writings "show a command of the language which surely... must have argued a fair standard of education"—manifestations that contradict the undocumented assertion that Morant was the uneducated son of a laborer (Denton 71).

Although Morant is recognized now as a fixture of Australian history, during his adulthood he likely would have considered himself an Englishman. Many of his writings concern Britain. Twice he returned to Britain from South Africa. In fact, he lived less than half his life, just 15 years, Down Under. Breaker was a self-assured poet, a horse trainer, and a soldier. He was loyal to his friends and, eventually, dedicated to military life, although he became known for often raucous behavior, particularly when he drank in excess. Breaker nonetheless tried the domestic life. He married Daisy O'Dwyer (later Daisy Bates), a beautiful and intelligent woman who later became a renowned anthropologist.<sup>4</sup> The marriage did not last long, however. Whether at the request of his new wife or of his own volition, he abandoned Daisy shortly after their marriage; the formal union ended in divorce within two years. At that point, as records indicate, he changed his name by deed poll to Harry Harbord Morant. Subsequently, he claimed to be the son of Admiral Sir (George) Digby Morant. Admiral Digby and all his recognized family denied any relationship to Harry Morant.<sup>5</sup>

The succeeding fifteen years in Queensland and New South Wales appear to have been nomadic for Morant, who tried his hand at a series of odd jobs. There, while gaining a reputation for his employment as a horse breaker, Morant befriended—and in some ways idolized—A.B. "Banjo" Patterson, the legendary Australian balladeer whose writing reflected a passion for and love of "the outback and its people" (Semmler 121). Morant translated his own passion for the wildness of Australia into "daredevil and reckless attitudes," even as he cultivated "grace of language" and an "instinct for rhyme and rhythm" (Semmler 122). By the time of his execution, in fact, under the pen name "The Breaker," he had published some sixty poems and ballads in *The Bulletin*, a Sydney-based magazine edited by Banjo Patterson. After Morant's death, Patterson published in *The Bulletin* some letters that he and Morant had exchanged, expressing doubt regarding his friend's murder conviction. Yet, over the years, in his published reminiscences Patterson came to "blacken and ridicule" Morant, as if the murder conviction had eaten away at Patterson's faith in his friend's basic decency. The personal letters between the two men reveal a "warmth and friendliness" in Morant that Patterson, like many later commentators, came somehow to overlook (Semmler 126 and Cutlack 23-27).

At the outbreak of the Boer War in South Africa, after years of hard living and lean income, Morant, although still full of energy, was eager to leave Australia and establish a new niche. He traveled to Adelaide and enlisted in a regular Australian army regiment—the Second Contingent of the South Australian Mounted Rifles—to serve with the relatively new Commonwealth nation's British forces in the South African War. He left by boat for South Africa on January 26, 1900, a year before Australian governmental federation.<sup>6</sup> During the first year of the war, Morant rose in rank to Sergeant in the mounted infantry. His experience with horses made him a valuable asset. Returning to South Australia for officer training, he was promoted to Lance Corporal. South Australian Colonel Joseph Gordon recommended him as a dispatch rider to the war correspondent for the *London Daily Telegraph*, a post that gave ample latitude to his impulses toward adventurous comings and goings. After this first service stint, he returned to England, where he became engaged to the sister of his good friend, Captain Frederick Percy Hunt, who also soon became an officer in the newly formed Bushveldt Carbineers (B.V.C.).

4. Daisy Bates was most notably known for her study of Australian aboriginal tribes.

5. After Morant's execution, the London press carried a story publicizing the Digbys' denouncement of Breaker's claim, however, Charles Ansell Morant and his father, Lt.-Colonel Charles May Allan Morant, supported Breaker's claim. See *Closed File*, p. 71.

6. The first contingent of the South Australian Mounted Rifles had left on November 1, 1899. The South Australian Bushmen left on February 27, 1900, followed by the South Australian Imperial Bushmen on May 1, 1900. Several other contingents left South Australia during 1901 and 1902. See *Military History of Australia*, p. 57-58.

Morant's regular enlistment had expired just as the Bushveldt Carbineers (B.V.C.), an irregular Imperial formation, had been raised at the behest of the British Army Intelligence service. The Boer armies, after a series of defeats in 1900, had formed groups of highly mobile commandos to attack British troops and supply lines. To counter these tactics, the British commanders on the ground had come to rely increasingly on mounted troops from Britain and the colonies. The Carbineers were thus formed and explicitly charged to counter the Boer guerrilla forces in the broad and desolate region known as the Northern Transvaal (Davey xvii). Records of such short-lived formations in the Imperial service often are sketchy, but what is known is that the B.V.C. unit comprised roughly 350 men, divided into a Headquarters section (50 men) and two mounted squadrons of roughly 150 riflemen each.<sup>7</sup> The unit was raised in late winter 1901, and disbanded, under a cloud of suspicion, just seven months later. But no other unit was more effective at fighting the Boer guerrilla forces.

Harry Morant had personal motivations for joining the B.V.C. (on April Fools' Day, 1901), including the need to pay off some of his numerous financial debts, but Australian enlistees overall had national and cultural reasons, as well. Australia wanted a seat at the Imperial table. Of the total 450,000 troops deployed in the Boer War, only 16,500 came from the outlying Empire (Henry 1), but, of these, Australian troops constituted more than half. Although Australia had been self-governing since the mid-19th Century, the country "wished for nationhood, but also wanted to support the Empire as part of the imperial family" (Henry 1).

This desire is shown vividly and economically in Beresford's film. As his grandfather raises a glass, Lieutenant George Witton (Lewis Fitzgerald) dreams of a toast to Empire, and presumably to himself, upon his departure for the war. Early in the film, Witton, untested in battle, speaks earnestly of his desire to fight for the imperial family and asks Morant (Edward Woodward) if he believes in empire. As Adam Henry explains, Witton wants to be Australia's "brave and noble type...the 'Bushman Soldier'...elevated to mythical status for his bush craft, fighting skills, and personification of the 'real' Australian spirit" (1). Yet Witton becomes disabused early on of the nobility of the armed conflict: he is ambushed repeatedly by Boers on a veldt, whose windswept isolation becomes the film's visual motif. In fact, the stripping away of his innocence is a central mechanism by which Morant utters his nationalistic lament: "We won't be missed...Australians are to be sacrificed." After his sentencing in the film, Morant tells Witton that Australians are expendable because Britain needs scapegoats. Witton's face, after his own sentencing, is the subject of a long and silent centering shot, with no interplay of other characters or background. Naiveté gives way to disbelief. He does have a role in the imperial family, just as he had wished, but it is not that of "hero."

Lt. Peter Handcock (Bryan Brown), the third soldier accused, is portrayed quite differently. He is the wild colonial male—unbridled in his treatment of women, horses, and officers. The camera lingers not on his face prior to the execution, perhaps because there is no shock to reveal, but upon the letter he writes his wife and son, a missive he concludes with the flourish, "Australia forever." He is a specifically Australian character, lacking decorum in his courtroom presentation. The stuffy British-court president, a Royal Army staff major, is insulted by Handcock's casual remark that one "slice of a cut loaf is never missed," in reference to his dalliance with a married woman. This insubordinate demeanor is necessary to "the narrative of the Australian postcolonial experience," which Elizabeth Birmingham characterizes as "a distinctly white, masculine form, one...played out in colonial situations which pit Australian mates against British authority" (4).

*Breaker Morant* further illustrates how these Australian mates fall victim not only to British authority but also to geopolitical bigotry. In the courtroom, an infantry officer with a heavy Scottish accent gives damaging testimony against the

7. That the BVC was an Australian unit is a common misconception. The unit comprised soldiers from at least 17 nations. Equally relevant, the British Intelligence Department created the BVC; therefore, it did not fall under the legal nor operational jurisdiction of the Australian government.

Australians for being undisciplined and uncontrollable. Although Major Thomas's cross-examination soon elicits the grudging admission by the Scottish officer that the suggestions and methods of the B.V.C. greatly facilitated and improved British operations, the admission is ignored. The very qualities that make the Australians such vigorous anti-guerrilla fighters also expose the British army, which had created and issued orders to the B.V.C., for its brutality. The wholesale disavowal of Australia's—not Britain's—uncivilized conduct was therefore inevitable, as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's precipitous judgment of the incident makes clear:

An irregular corps...[with its] wild duties, its mixed composition, and its isolated situation must have militated against discipline and restraint, and it appears to have degenerated into a band not unlike those Southern 'bush-whackers' in the American [civil] war to whom the Federals showed little mercy. [The Carbineers] had given short shrift to the Boer prisoners who had fallen into their hands, the excuse offered for their barbarous conduct being that an officer who had served in the corps had himself been murdered by the Boers. Such a reason, even if it were true, could... offer no justification for indiscriminate revenge... This stern measure [the execution of Handcock and Morant] shows more clearly than volumes of argument could... how high was the standard of discipline of the British army, and how heavy was the punishment, and how vain all excuses, where it had been infringed. In the fact of this actual outrage and its prompt punishment how absurd becomes that crusade against imaginary outrages preached by an ignorant press abroad, and by renegade Englishmen at home. (Quoted in *Bruce Beresford, Breaker Morant*)

The disparity, however, of the sentences and the swiftness with which the executions were carried out seem unusual, even in the generally brisk and straightforward British military justice system. Moreover, the historical record describes similar cases of Boer shootings by British officers in the field, but none of these cases came to be prosecuted by the British military courts.

The characterization, then, of the Australian soldiers is as important as the historical presentation of the court martial. There is little doubt in the film that they shot the prisoners, and the film remains vague on the existence of orders from superiors to do so. Beresford is neither damning nor absolving the soldiers. His target, rather, is the way the event has been used to delineate a civilized Britain from a barbarous Australia. The B.V.C. soldiers are shown to be loyal and determined. Even at their execution, they comply with each military protocol, neither running nor ranting. Their conduct is as British as the empire could expect.<sup>8</sup>

8. During the court-martial, in life as in the film, the Boers stormed the compound where Breaker, Handcock, and Witton were held. In order to have fighting hands available, the guards temporarily released the accused, who promptly took a valuable part in the defense of the compound. In court Thomas puts this fact forward in hopes of obtaining condonation, but such efforts (which happened several times in Vietnam) did not induce the acquittal of the three Carbineers; nor had they for any other accused military prisoners of war during the decades since the condonation option had last been used by the British forces, namely, by Lord Wellington, nearly 100 years earlier.

9. Some 61 in all: British, Boer, black South African, military and civilian.

Their crime, however, was considerable. Morant faced charges for his reported orders to shoot some 14 prisoners in a number of separate incidents. These cold-blooded killings were of such a large number, as was the list of government witnesses,<sup>9</sup> that once the charges were brought forward, some form of substantial punishment seemed inevitable. The case against him and his cohorts, as presented by Thomas, hinged on whether they had carried out the killings of the prisoners under secret orders from Lord Kitchener: the so-called Rule 303 (so-called, no doubt, because .303 was the caliber of the British rifles). Morant claimed he had received such orders directly from his friend, Captain Hunt, whom the Boers later fatally tortured. If Morant had, argue some scholars, then these orders would have been repugnant to the accepted rules of warfare. "The normality was...that soldiers fought one another, observed a code of conduct which was tough but humane" (Denton 41). No direct evidence has ever been uncovered to indicate that any such Rule 303 order ever existed, and most of the scholarly literature on the case reflects this reality, but the Beresford film leaves the question open because the larger question is whether Britain can see its colonies as equals, good or bad.

In the 1970s, the Australian federal government became so concerned that an

“authentic Australian identity” seemed threatened both by a murky colonial past and a possibly American-dominated future that the government created an Australian national film corporation. The first two films under the aegis of this corporation to receive critical acclaim, *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975) and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), reflected colonial concerns—“the isolation, the landscape, the relationship of white inhabitants to the land” (Birmingham 3). *Breaker Morant* is another entry in this list. The film retells a story with which most Australians would already be familiar (Henry 2). George Witton’s book, *Scapegoats of Empire*, originally published in 1907, had been quite popular. And Beresford adapted his film from an enigmatic and successful 1978 stage play, Kenneth Ross’s “*Breaker*” *Morant* (1978). Although Beresford’s film takes no stand on the guilt or innocence of the Australian defendants, the scenes surrounding the execution of Hancock and Morant evince a nationalistic treatment of events. Morant at one point says contemptuously that the coffins were constructed before he and Hancock were measured for them—that is, before the evidence had been weighed and the verdict officially presented. Indeed, the post-execution burial sequence indicates that Hancock does not readily fit into his box. The conviction—of Australian identity—was a *fait d’accompli*.

The moral question of shooting prisoners during the Boer War was actually a logistical one. Because they were fighting for their land, the Boers felt they had little else to lose. Boldness was crucial to survival. On the other side, in the principal areas of the frustrating guerrilla campaign in the Transvaal in the year following Kitchener’s appointment as commander, the number of Boer prisoners of war had more than doubled: from 15,000 to 31,000. Because of the strain on British resources, the fate of any Boer prisoners, captured anywhere in the countryside, during this period must have become increasingly tenuous. Furthermore, the Boers’ already extreme tactics were becoming alarmingly aggressive, surreptitious, and successful. Denton writes, “it is hardly difficult to understand, in light of the Boer subversive methods, why the counter was a tendency to shoot prisoners” (Denton 44). Deneys Reitz, for instance, a Boer soldier, in his memoir, *Commando*,<sup>10</sup> describes an incident during which Boer fighters, dressed in British khaki, attacked a British cavalry post, killing some seventy-seven soldiers to the Boers’ one fatality.

The impulse to summarily dispatch Boers was therefore strong, and it went all the way to the top. In July 1901, a month before the first episode for which Morant was eventually charged, General Kitchener himself had applied to the British War Office in London for permission to shoot the whole of a Boer Commando force captured in Cape Colony. The British War Office denied permission. Nonetheless, Kitchener’s documented request offers telling support for Morant’s claim regarding Rule 303. Unfortunately, none of the four copies of the court-martial record is known to have survived. This detail Beresford’s film does not mention, not even in the credits. The Australian authorities had grown extremely critical of British forces’ employing Australian troops and endeavored to expose such failings. The Australian Prime Minister and Parliament were also concerned to learn the “whole truth” of the Breaker case. But they never received the copy of the trial transcript they had requested upon learning of the quick verdict. Likewise, the South African government never received the transcript it had been promised by the British military court. Something was amiss. Further muddying the waters, the copy of the transcript housed at the British Public Record Office was, according to that office, destroyed during a Nazi bombing raid on September 9, 1940. And the transcript copy held by Lord Kitchener, the Commanding Officer of all British military forces serving in South Africa in 1901-1902, was supposedly pitched overboard, along with a number of his other papers, when he sailed from Britain to India in 1902, shortly after the conclusion of the Boer War. The only remaining “official” records are the depositions<sup>11</sup> and the officers’ sworn charge statements found in various African nations’ archives, although these depositions have not been tested for their truth value by an experienced barrister in the courtroom.

10. Worthy of note: a 27-year hiatus between the composition and subsequent publication of this book. Reitz’s facts, therefore, may be considered quite accurate and his viewpoints pertinent to the actual events.

11. Witness statements made under oath during the preliminary investigations. See Denton, p.85.

The accused's legal representation also complicates the issue. Defense counsel for Morant and his co-defendants was Major J.F. Thomas (Jack Thompson), of Tenterfield, Australia. Thomas had been trained entirely as a solicitor (a legal investigator and adviser), not a barrister (a trial attorney), and before this case he had conducted solicitor's duties only. Not only was Thomas a solicitor, with no prior courtroom experience, but his only prior legal experience had been that of handling wills and estates, and virtually all of this narrow experience had been gained in his civilian life. For most of Thomas' first period of service, he served as commanding officer of the reputedly undisciplined and inefficient Australian New South Wales Bushman Corps. The deck appeared to be stacked against the defendants. Even the observance of discovery protocols had favored the prosecution: Breaker, Handcock, and Witton were arrested in October 1901; defense counsel Thomas received the boxes full of paperwork on the case on January 10, 1902; the court martial began the next day (Bridges 25).<sup>12</sup>

12. Furthermore, the several months' investigation into the Morant episode was conducted not by a qualified military solicitor, but by an Australian born (in New South Wales) British intelligence officer of Spanish extraction, a 31-year-old, named Frederick Ramon de Bertodando. Captain de Bertodando's major accomplishment in South Africa was his conception and raising of the so-called Kaffir scouts, a group of native South Africans, well familiar with life on the veldt, to work as mercenary guides for the British forces in the field.

13. Present-day Namibia; on this paragraph and the following one in the text, see Denton, p. 92.

Another surprising fact, overlooked in the film and by film historians, is that the prosecutor in the case, British Major Charles Bolton (Rod Mullinar), is styled as Great Britain's best military prosecutor. In fact, the government prosecutor, Bolton, was a regular Army line officer with little to no formal legal training. Not surprisingly, he had never tried any kind of major felony-level case before the Breaker case went to court. The real Bolton, unlike the eager, crafty, and confident character of the Beresford film, requested in writing, several times, to be relieved of his heavy legal responsibilities with this case. Bolton felt unqualified to prosecute three commissioned officers on multiple murder charges during a high-pressure war-time environment. Conspiracy theorists might seize on this fact to argue that Bolton was a patsy, and they might be right, especially given the film's portrayal of Kitchener, who demands a guilty verdict. But Beresford's distortion of the Bolton character preserves the ambiguity of the case. And that seems to be the real point: not so much to establish the guilt or the innocence of the men, but to dramatize the anxiety of a nation toward the colonies that formed—or threatened—its empire.

The relatively closed process for holding a court martial at that time helps to explain how it could have been manipulated. A court-martial board, even for a capital offense, comprised only five people: a president, who voted but also served as judge, and four other voting members. The Court-Martial President exerted a much more active voice in the proceedings, especially at that time, than would any judge in a civilian jury trial of such magnitude. Yet, for conviction in a very complex capital murder case, such as Morant's, all five members of the Board would have to vote "yes." Lastly, in a court-martial proceeding such as this one, the Board President was selected by the Theatre Convening Authority, namely, the senior British commander in South Africa at the time. In the Breaker Morant case, the Convening Authority was General Kitchener.

The Morant case had precipitated from a visit to Kitchener's Headquarters by the German Proconsul in South Africa, who had inquired about the alleged murder of a German missionary, Reverend Heese, in the Northern Transvaal. Heese had been born in Cape Colony and was therefore considered a subject of the British monarchy. He had allegedly been killed by Lt. Handcock, under orders by Morant, for having witnessed the killings, or at least the freshly dead bodies, of several Boer prisoners, recently executed by Morant and his men. A dispute over jurisdiction was looming. Throughout the Boer War, German threat had remained on the horizon of British Imperial power. In 1884, Germany had gained control of South West Africa,<sup>13</sup> immediately northwest of the Cape Colony, a British-controlled area. Britain sought to gain control of the areas surrounding the Cape, so as to unify this mineral-rich African region in His Majesty's favor. The Boers, hoping to enlist the all-out sympathies of the Germans, invited Germany to open trade relations with them. Although the German government refused to interfere openly in the armed struggle in the Transvaal in which the B.V.C.

had become involved, it did sympathize with the Boers and therefore supplied them with munitions and weaponry. The Germans hoped eventually to become more deeply involved in the armed conflict, should some more publicly acceptable cause arise. The British military-political leadership feared that the slaying of Reverend Heese, if unpunished, could provide an excuse for Germany to enter the war on the side of the Boers.

The case of Heese's murder only complicates the issue further, because no member of the B.V.C. had been found legally responsible, a verdict by which the British government formally satisfied the expressed concerns of the German authorities at the time. But the solicitor of the case, Frederick Ramon De Bertodando, had reason to believe that Morant had given the deadly order and that Handcock had performed the execution, much as Beresford's film depicts. The potential chief witness to the order and the slaying, Morant's Kaffir "boy," mysteriously disappeared—forever—a few hours before British government officials had planned to compel a sworn deposition from him regarding the Heese murder. In a private letter to J.F. Thomas in 1929, co-defendant Lt. George Witton stated that, after his sentencing, he learned from Morant that Handcock had broken down under interrogation and confessed to all of the charges, including the killing of Heese.

For his part, Morant never denied ordering the shooting of the prisoners. Barry Bridges writes in his article "Lord Kitchener and the Morant-Handcock Executions" that "Morant took full responsibility for ordering [the] executions" (Bridges 25). But Morant's direct admissions revealed his obvious indignation toward his indictment, stating, "we were out fighting Boers, not sitting comfortably behind wire fences...we got 'em and we shot 'em under Rule 303."<sup>14</sup> The orders given to him by Captain Percy Hunt,<sup>15</sup> Morant testified, had been orally transmitted by Lieutenant Colonel H.I.W. Hamilton, Field Marshal Kitchener's secretary.

Such orders supposedly prohibited even securing Boer prisoners. In court and under oath at trial, in both the historical record and the film, Hamilton clearly and firmly denied passing along any such orders from Kitchener to Hunt or to anyone else. And Kitchener, of course, never gave sworn testimony either to prosecution or defense (Bailes 66). In their book *In Search of Breaker Morant*, Margaret Carnegie and Frank Shields write that Kitchener desperately hoped to keep the trials from the Australian authorities, as he most likely could expect "unwelcome interference." Kitchener evaded all requests for relevant information and documents on the Breaker group until well after the trials and sentences had occurred. The spotlight was especially uncomfortable. Contemporaneous with the Morant court-martial, media criticism of a separate, unrelated trial of Australian officers facing a lesser charge, "inciting mutiny," was burgeoning (Carnegie 112). Kitchener was publicly steering clear. Once the accused had been convicted, however, the General wasted no time in carrying out the verdicts: he confirmed the sentences on the following day, and within 18 hours Handcock and Morant were executed (Semmler 123).<sup>16</sup>

Against Morant and his cohorts' assertion of a standing order against taking Boer prisoners is the historical record of one Victoria Cross recipient. With a few of his men, Alexander Young, a sergeant-major of the British army, had rushed a kopje<sup>17</sup> overtaken by Boer soldiers. In pursuit of the fleeing enemy yet still under fire, Young captured but did not kill a Boer commandant. Arguably, the British army would not likely recommend the highest military award to an officer, of Irish descent, who directly disobeyed a standing order.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, if the order had been universal among the British armed forces, why would Morant have used it as a pretext for ordering the execution of Heese, a non-combatant? At that point, Morant surely would have "realized that those orders were unlawful and that he and his subordinates had made themselves accomplices in Kitchener's crime" (Bridges 27).

Perhaps the most damaging evidence against Morant can be found in the detailed

14. Morant, H.H. op. cit., see Davey.

15. In his defense, Morant testified that "he had not carried out [his]...orders until enraged by the mutilation by Boers of Hunt's body, possibly before he was killed" (Bridges 26). He and Hunt had become very close; Morant was even engaged to Hunt's sister. On August 5, 1901, Capt. Hunt and 17 Carbineers rushed a Boer farmhouse and were surprised to encounter four times as many Boers as expected. During the attack both Captain Hunt and Sergeant Eland were killed. According to one witness, and corroborated by others, Hunt was at first only wounded. He had been shot at close range, but the bullet had passed through his right shoulder, and apparently this wound was not fatal. Yet when his body was later found, it had been stripped naked. The sinews at the backs of both knees and ankles had been severed; his head had sustained bruises, and he had a crushed cheekbone, evidence of an extensive beating. Lastly, Captain Hunt had been castrated.

16. Unlike in the Beresford film, Morant never actually saw the body but received a report about its condition. In the film version, when a Boer soldier, Visser, is subsequently captured and found wearing a British tunic, Morant assumes that this was the same garment removed from his friend, Hunt, and that Visser had killed and mutilated the British officer serving with the B.V.C. (During the final years of the War, most "conventional military activity" was replaced with more aggressive, extreme tactics that were more effective against guerillas [Bailes 98]. The Boer resources had thus become increasingly strained, and their soldiers often had been forced to wear any clothing they could find.) An enraged and grieving Morant then exacted his revenge by executing Visser and all the other Boer prisoners in tow. Records indicate that an order had, indeed, been officially issued by British officials to shoot Boers found wearing British army uniforms, yet such executions were to be carried out only if a clear intent to deceive British forces could be determined. In the case against Morant, such an intent would have been difficult to prove.

17. On a related note, the three Australian officers convicted of inciting mutiny were also sentenced to be shot, yet this sentence was commuted, and ultimately “tactfully overruled,” as a result of Australian government interference. See Carnegie/Shields; and Bailes. “Military Aspects,” p. 66.

18. A kopje is a small hill rising up from a veldt (elevated and open grassland in southern Africa).

19. Victoria Cross recipients during the Anglo-Boer War among colonial forces were as follows: six Australians, eight Scotsmen, thirteen Irishmen, one New Zealander, five Canadians, five South Africans.

20. C.S. 1092, Letterbook II, pp.37-46. See Davey.

21. This document outlines six discrete incidents in all, and provides specific dates and details pertaining to each charge.

letter sent to Pietersburg by the men of the B.V.C.<sup>19</sup> In a lengthy document, delineating the “disgraceful incidents” of which they believed Morant guilty, fifteen men demanded that the officials in Pietersburg “hold an exhaustive and impartial inquiry” into the Boer prisoner shootings. This letter did not merely make broad or vague statements of guilt, but rather provided detailed accounts of each discrete “charge.”<sup>20</sup> The statements seem damning, accusing Morant, Handcock, and Witton of shooting disarmed, wounded, or surrendered Boers, as well as women and children. According to Kit Denton, “the social code under which such men at the time lived would have precluded any suggestion of corrupt practice,” and yet these men apparently felt strongly enough about the guilt of Morant and his cohorts that they broke this code (Denton 92).

These charges notwithstanding, writers like Bridges, Denton, and Doyle fail to mention several mitigating tactical realities concerning Breaker’s unit. Its small, tired, and often out-numbered long-range horse patrols never had any spare horses or wagons with which to transport Boer prisoners. In addition, Breaker’s necessarily swift-moving command could barely carry with them enough food and water for their own subsistence. Kitchener’s scorched-earth policy had by this phase of the War almost entirely denuded the veldt of evident food sources, and the small communities of Boers who had worked the small farms had by this period of the War been removed to the first concentration camps of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where many of the captive Boer families eventually perished, so there was little food available on nearby farmland. The small bands of Bushveldt Carbineers certainly had no means to provide shelter for any Boers they captured. Nor did they have any materials with them, such as barbed wire, to confine any prisoners they captured. Without electronic communication, Breaker could not even seek advice from headquarters on how to manage captured Boers. Since the Boers often knew of nearby ammunition and weapons caches, not to mention hidden storehouses of food and water on the veldt, had the Boer prisoners been released, they would likely soon thereafter have again become active enemy combatants.

*Breaker Morant* closes with the song “Soldiers of the Queen.” As the credits roll, Edward Woodward, the actor who plays Breaker Morant, sings a tune whose lyrics can be read, on the surface, as soldierly pride—“when you talk of empire, say who made her so”—but they also work, rather poetically, as orders to remember not just how the empire was made but who made it:

And when we say we’re always won  
 And when they ask us how it’s done  
 We’ll proudly point to every one  
 Of England’s soldiers of the Queen.

In the brutal and glorious “how” of empire, the Aussie is simply another Englishman.

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