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In July 2013, a moot appeal at the Victorian Supreme Court ruled that Harry ‘Breaker’ Morant and his co-accused, George Witton and Peter Handcock, were unfairly tried for crimes committed during the final part of the Second Boer War (1899-1902). The three soldiers were court-martialled for the murder of nine captured Boers, and Morant and Handcock were executed on 27 February 1902.

Last year’s non-binding verdict – along with a recent two-part documentary, Breaker Morant: The Retrial – has renewed calls for an official inquest into the convictions. Military lawyer James Unkles, who features heavily in the documentary and who has campaigned on Morant’s behalf for almost a decade, hopes the recent interest will further pressure British authorities to issue a posthumous pardon.

The appeal did not find the soldiers innocent of the murders – in fact, Morant was almost certainly guilty – but ruled that they had been denied a fair trial and executed before a chance of appeal (Morant and Handcock were both shot within eighteen hours of sentencing). Moreover, the court found that the accused had followed Lord Kitchener’s order – obeying one’s supervisor was a legitimate legal defence up until the Nuremberg Trials – to take no prisoners.
and to shoot Boers caught in British uniform. According to Unkles, when Morant, Handcock and Witton were charged with murder, their commanding officer refused to risk a scandal by defending them – in fact, Lord Kitchener himself signed their death warrants. The courts martial, Unkles concludes, were a sham.

Morant should be pardoned for the sake of military justice. After four years of research, however, I am in no doubt that in his personal life, Morant, like other Australian anti-heroes such as Ned Kelly and Chopper Read, was a slippery bastard.

Birth certificates issued by England’s General Register Office warn that ‘a certificate is not evidence of identity’ and that is certainly true in this case. The Breaker did not start life as Harry Harbord Morant: his certificate states that he is Edwin Henry Murrant, born in the subdistrict of Bridgwater in Somerset on 9 December 1864. Before he died by firing squad in Pretoria, he had become a lieutenant in the British army, fighting on behalf of the Empire in South Africa. But before that he was well known throughout Australia as the Breaker – a published poet and horseman.

Official records show his transformation as follows:

- 1864 – birth certificate: Edwin Henry Murrant
- 1871 – census records, Bridgwater Union Workhouse: Edwin Henry Murrant, scholar, age six
- 1881 – census records, Silesia College: Edwin Henry Murrant, tutor, age seventeen
- 1883 – shipping records: Ed Murrant, age twenty (note: according to the birth record, he would have turned nineteen in December 1883)
- 1884 – marriage certificate: Daisy May O’Dwyer and Edwin Henry Murrant, gentleman, age twenty-on (note: according to the birth record, he would have turned twenty in December 1884)
- 1884 – court records: Ed H Morant, thief, age undefined
- 1899 – enlistment in second contingent: Lieut. Harry Harbord Morant
- 1901 – prison records: Harry Harbord Morant, convicted murderer, age thirty-five.

Some biographers argue that his wife, Daisy May O’Dwyer (later Daisy Bates, the famous anthropologist, Aboriginal activist and writer), encouraged him to change his surname to Morant. While the marriage does mark the beginning of Murrant’s transformation, his name did not alter until after he and Daisy had split.

Morant avoided paying the clergyman his honorarium for the marriage ceremony; shortly after the marriage, Morant wrote a cheque to pay for a saddle and some horses and then quickly left Charters Towers. The cheque was dishonoured. When he was caught, Morant was also charged with stealing thirty-two pigs.

The couple never divorced – and Morant continued to fabricate his past.

In their biography, In Search of Breaker Morant: Balladist and Bushveldt Carbineer, Margaret Carnegie and Frank Shields note the limited evidence from this period:

Exactly when Edwin Henry changed his Christian names to Harry Harbord
is uncertain, nor is it known when he invented the tale that Admiral Sir George Digby Morant was his father, for he told them in Charters Towers [in Queensland] that he had been educated by an uncle. There is no doubt he had a chip on his shoulder which made him boastful.\textsuperscript{4}

Other writers who knew Morant perpetuated a number of the myths he had initiated. Major Claude Jarvis met him in Pretoria, just before Morant joined the Bushveldt Carbineers.\textsuperscript{5} In his 1943 autobiography, \textit{Half a Life}, Jarvis is sympathetic, describing Morant as ‘one of those extraordinarily attractive “ne’er-do-wells”\textsuperscript{6} and Morant’s execution as ‘the most ghastly tragedy of the war’.\textsuperscript{7} He relates the rumour that ‘in his youth [Morant] had been in the Navy and had been forced to resign from the Service over some escapade or other’.\textsuperscript{8} In response, Jarvis received several letters from Morant sympathisers, and this correspondence has contributed to the ongoing mythology surrounding Morant’s personal history.\textsuperscript{9}

One letter came from the daughter of a Major Bolton of the Wilts Regiment, who claimed that her father had been the provost marshal at Bloemfontein in 1901 and was prosecutor during some of the hearings. In her letter, she claims that on the train to Pretoria just before he and his companions were executed, Morant had told her father that he ‘had been in the Navy, but had got into trouble over a card debt which had forced him to leave the service and embark on a roving life’.\textsuperscript{10} But this was written forty years after the events by a woman who was ten years of age at the time.

The biographer Frederic Cutlack acknowledges that the story of the Breaker is tantalising but ‘obviously lacking in certain details’.\textsuperscript{11} Looking closely at Morant’s different incarnations, it is clear that he was not averse to colouring his past.

Just before leaving for South Africa, Morant worked for the Ogilvie family on Paringa Station in South Australia and visited the well-known Morant family at their orange orchard in Renmark. Charles Morant, known as the ‘Colonel’, was the brother of Admiral Digby Morant, whom Harry claimed was his father. The Colonel was renowned in the region for his great kindness and unvarying courtesy, and he had been hospitable to Harry Morant during his many visits. But it is now generally understood that during his time in Australia, Morant was a fabricator and that his familial connections were contrived.

In \textit{Closed File}, Kit Denton describes Morant’s relationship with the two families:

Miss Hilda Truman of Adelaide has told me in letters and in conversation that Charles always considered Harry to be his relative; as did the Cutlack family of South Australia, a household where The Breaker was a frequent visitor, a friend of the father of the house, and known well enough for F M Cutlack to have detailed in his book \textit{Breaker Morant} much of what the family knew of Harry’s life, although it must be understood that those details were supplied by Harry and with no supporting proof.\textsuperscript{12}

There is no physical evidence to support Morant’s story that he was Digby Morant’s son, despite having been accepted as a ‘relative’ by the Cutlack family and the Renmark
branch of the Morant family. The admiral himself fervently and publicly denied paternity – even after the Breaker’s death.13

What seemed important to Morant was how he was perceived. The idea that he was a ‘gentleman’ enabled him to associate with Australia’s cultural and social elite, especially the poets connected with The Bulletin – and, in particular, the bush balladeer and writer ‘Banjo’ Paterson.

Paterson’s uncle Andrew Barton, who had employed Morant, warned his nephew:

[H]e says he is the son of an English Admiral and he has good manners and education. He can do anything better than most people ... anything except work. I don’t know what is the matter with the chap. He seems to be brimming over with flashness.14

The younger Paterson was fascinated with Morant, and thoroughly enjoyed their first encounter.5 It led to a mutual respect that resulted in the exchange of dozens of letters. Morant’s letters often harked back to life among the upper classes of Devon. In 1895 he wrote:

In the course of a month or six weeks I intend departing from these regions to try Coolgardie. If I don’t find it prosperous over there, next Christmas will find one prodigal turning up in England with a request for prime veal.16

Yet Morant’s immediate family was not as wealthy as he implied. The father named on his birth certificate (also named Edwin Murrant) was deceased; his mother was a retired workhouse matron. Moreover, until the age of eight, the younger Edwin Murrant himself lived at the Bridgwater Union Workhouse. While Carnegie and Shields claim that Morant’s mother, Catherine, ‘vanished from the face of the globe’ after 1866,17 she did in fact live at the workhouse until 1891. She later returned to live in Devon, where she died in 1899 at the age of sixty-six.18

Morant was probably ashamed of his family’s workhouse history. In the wake of Charles Dickens’ 1838 classic Oliver Twist, workhouses had become infamous as places of disease, prostitution and abandon, a ‘passive emblem of misery of the nineteenth century’.19 Workhouse children, in particular, were regarded as the carriers of disease.20 The Bridgwater Union Workhouse recorded tramps and vagrants – with comments such as ‘lunatic’ and ‘imbecile’ beside their names21 – as living on site during the period when Edwin Henry Murrant was listed as a ‘scholar’. Furthermore, as Russell Ward points out, ‘if any class was more generally despised than the paupers, it was those who guarded them’.22 An association with the workhouse system contradicted Morant’s image of himself as a well-connected gentleman.

Morant’s association with poetry and horsemanship plays a considerable part in his legend, particularly here in Australia, but both of these also add to his elusiveness as a historical figure. His earliest poems expose something of an Irish connection of which he spoke little. His mother was the daughter of an Irish farmer,23 and Morant had a particular affinity with Irish immigrants in Australia. His wife was also Irish, and he went droving with his Irish friends. Through Morant’s very early poetry, we know of the Irishmen Paddy Magee, Brumby Bill and

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Brigalow Mick. In one of Morant’s final letters, exchanged between prisoners in Pietersburg gaol cells, Morant takes on an air of dark humour but concludes with a prayer to Ireland:

Dartmoor!
At 7.45 they open the doors
And the Promenade’s flooded with
London’s---------s
God Save Oireland! Thine TONY
Lieut Hannam, per favor Gar.-Adjt. 

Ireland was not his birthplace, and yet it is significant that in Morant’s final hours his words should so prominently point to his acknowledgement of an Irish ancestry. But while Morant’s early Australian experiences and his early poetry allude to an Irish heritage, this aspect vanishes in his later works – and none of his poetry ever reflected or acknowledged the workhouse.

Morant was also known as a skilled horsebreaker, but like his claim to gentlemanly connections, the stories of his horsemanship are questionable. The first reference to Morant as a horse breaker occurs in 1887 when he was admitted to hospital in Muttaburra, where his admission form recorded him as working in that capacity on Maneroo Station. Shortly after this, in 1889, Morant’s first poems appeared in The Bulletin under his pen-name, the Breaker.

His equestrian antics were remembered many years after his death:

The Breaker backed himself to jump the creamy over the fence barebacked – the stakes, drinks all round. The fence was a solid four-railed, about 4 feet 8 inches high; on the landing side there was the footpath, about 6 feet wide, and the gutter. I held up the clothes line in the hotel yard so that Morant would not get pulled off. He not only jumped the horse out of the yard but turned him round and jumped back again; the horse did not touch the fence on either occasion. It was a wonderful performance.

On another occasion, it is said that drinking led the Breaker to wager his horse, Cavalier, to jump a seven-foot picket fence, at which the poor animal baulked but ‘scrambled over’. Yet this story has many variations: in some versions Morant was blindfolded; in others, he jumped the horse by candlelight or by the light of matches placed on the fence posts.

It is important to understand that The Bulletin writers had to, as Richard Fotheringham argues, ‘be able to demonstrate their bush credentials, and to claim the verisimilitude of the representation of that experience as their greatest achievement.’ Paterson himself was a city dweller and yet seen as authority on the Outback, just as Arthur Hoey Davis became famous as his bush persona ‘Steele Rudd’.

Beyond the pages of The Bulletin, Morant was as much known for his arrogant exhibitionism as for horse breaking. He was frequently in the news for his accidents involving horses, and when he had enlisted in South Australia for the war, the Windsor and Richmond Gazette joked that ‘if Morant had gone for the NSW contingent he would probably have been “spun for bad riding”’.

A gossip segment in the same paper suggests that the stories of his legendary horsemanship have likely been overstated:

As announced last week, Mr Harry Morant (‘The Breaker’) met with an accident, through a fall from a horse, and suffered the dislocation of his right shoulder. This is not the first occasion on which Mr Morant has met with a similar mishap, for that unlucky shoulder of
his has been broken or dislocated twice before; whilst the escapes he has had from total annihilation in consequence of the frequent falls from his horse have been legion. The only wonder is that he lives to tell the tales. 

Despite his foolhardiness, Morant did genuinely love horses, dedicating poems to his favourite horses, Cavalier and Harlequin; in 1896, he had Cavalier immortalised in a portrait by the famous painter Frank Prout Mahony. This held him in good stead with the gentlemen’s clubs, but the myths must be balanced with stories from those who knew the devil in him.

Many biographers claim that Morant was charming, but some accounts of his early life in Australia depict a man whose character was not so innocuous. Morris Hawkins, the son of one of Morant’s early employers, recalls that Morant stole a treasured bugle made from a bullock’s horn and used it as a smoker’s stand. As a child, Hawkins had been too afraid to take it back; he and his brother kept their distance from Morant. Hawkins also describes Morant’s cruelty to Indigenous Australians: he would use his charm to lure Aboriginal men into a roundhouse or stable for a friendly boxing match, but would lock the door to prevent escape and beat the man unconscious.

Most telling of Morant’s sadism was the frequency and vividness by which he described his cruelty to animals to Paterson. In a letter from August 1895, he bragged about a dingo he had finished off ‘with that good old weapon, the stirrup-iron’. On another occasion he had used a knife to hamstring a heifer after bullets failed to drop her, and he proudly confessed to owning a lancer’s spear for hunting pigs. He told Paterson that ‘pigsticking is not bad fun’.

Recalling Morant, Major Victor Marra Newland, who had been present at the executions, writes fondly of his friend’s exploits:

Poor beggar, how well I remember him: outcast, boon comrade, drunken beast, and brave man. It seems but yesterday we trekked, starved, stole and fought together – what a mate in those long hours of night watch or day march – what tales he could tell, what merry rhymes recite.

And there were days before, too, down in great sunny Australia: days of racing, of begging and starving, days of wine and women, rags, drunkenness and disgrace – Poor old Breaker!

The truth about the early life of Edwin Henry Murrant aka Harry Harbord Morant – the Breaker – may never be known. As Nick Bleszynski writes, ‘Most people have to wait for their legend to be created by the hand of others but “The Breaker” simply wrote his own’. After 110 years of searching original handwritten documents and interpreting misspelled transcripts, or of trawling the internet for government records, the only way Australia really knows the man who was shot at dawn on 27 February 1902 – convicted of multiple murders – is as he presented himself.
in no way resembled the child born to a struggling widow in a disease-ridden workhouse. Nor was he truly a bastard conceived of a clandestine affair between his mother and an adulterous naval officer; he took the credit but never the shame. He was, and is, the man he wanted us to believe in and he left his ‘Last Rhyme and Testament’ in metered verse ‘whilst waiting cru-ci-fixion’! Signing, of course, as the Breaker.40

2 The three were also accused of the murder of Reverend Daniel Heese, a German missionary who witnessed the summary executions. However, this charge was dropped due to a lack of witnesses. It is also generally accepted that Morant considered the murder of the Boer captives a justified reprisal for the death of Captain Percy Hunt, Morant’s closest friend.
3 PL Murray, Official Records of the Australian Military Contingents to the War in South Africa, Department of Defence, Canberra, 1911.
5 The Bushveldt Carbineers were a short-lived, multinational mounted infantry regiment of the British Army during the Boer conflict.
7 ibid., p. 126.
8 ibid., p. 127.
10 ibid., p. 94.
11 ibid., p. ix.
12 Kit Denton, Closed File, Rigby, Adelaide, p. 70.
16 Cutlack, Breaker Morant, p. 29.
17 ibid., p. 10.
18 Record for Catherine Murrant, England and Wales Death Index: 1837–1915.
20 ibid., p. 203.
21 Record for Edwin Stenery Marant, United Kingdom census (1871).
23 Record for Catherin Newwrant, United Kingdom census (1881). See also Carnegie & Shields, In Search of Breaker Morant, p. 7.
26 Cutlack, Breaker Morant, p. 33.
27 ibid., p. 32.
30 ibid., p. 300.
31 Windsor and Richmond Gazette, 3 March 1900, p. 3.
32 ibid., 12 March 1898, p. 9.
33 Kit Denton, Closed File, p. 73.
35 ibid., p. 22.
36 Renar, Bushman and Buccaneer, p. 7.
37 ibid., p. 8.
39 Bleszynski, Shoot Straight, You Bastards, p. 6.