

Film Review: *Breaker Morant* (1980)

Breaker Morant is a fascinating but unsettling Australian film about disloyalty and betrayal. It is based on historical events that took place during the *Second Boer War* (1899 to 1902,) although it has universal relevance to both human nature and warfare.

With the discovery of gold and diamonds in South Africa, British fortune-seekers from Britain's *Cape Colony* invaded the South African Republic's *Transvaal* and *Orange Free State* regions. These British "*foreigners*" were denied full citizenship by the Dutch settlers there, causing them to petition British authorities back in the *Cape Colony* for redress. After Britain dispatched 10,000 soldiers to the region in 1899, armed conflict arose between British soldiers and Boer militia and Boer civilian snipers.

The Boers' *hit-and-run* ambush tactics against British *invaders* gave them several victories in early skirmishes. This prompted **Lord Kitchener** (Alan Cassell) -- commanding a 180,000-man *British Expeditionary Force* -- to establish a counter-insurgency policy in 1900. His program included units of very tough and elite mounted infantry ("*Bushveldt Carbineers*") to pursue Boer guerillas under a "*scorched-Earth policy*."



Bushveldt Carbineers

Three *Bushveldt Carbineers* are eventually arrested, court-martialed, and sentenced to death for executing prisoners, which provides the focus of the film's plot. One of the three is the film's title character, **Lt. Harry "Breaker" Morant** (Edward Woodward,) an Australian and former "breaker" of horses, who became his unit's commanding officer after **Captain Simon Hunt** (Terence Donovan) was shot and captured in an ambush, and then tortured and mutilated by Boers. *Breaker Morant* was a close friend of *Captain Hunt* and engaged to his sister, so the brutality of *Captain Hunt's* murder enraged *Morant* and the rest of his company.

Breaker Morant and his mounted infantry unit immediately pursued the Boer guerillas who were responsible, ambushing them and killing several before the rest could escape. Some subordinates then begged *Morant* to execute two captured Boers who hadn't successfully escaped during the ambush. Yet, those who persuaded *Morant* to execute the two Boers later testified against him at his murder trial, **disloyally** minimizing their own roles and claiming to have merely been following *Morant's orders*.



Woodward as Morant



Lt. Harry "Breaker" Morant

Lord Kitchener was not only the architect of the *scorched-Earth policy* adopted by his *Expeditionary Force*, he also tacitly established the policy to shoot prisoners. He recognized that if mounted infantry were encumbered by prisoners, it would hinder their ability to remain the rapid response force they were intended to be. *Kitchener's* policies were well known and understood by his officer corps. At one point, several of the Boers who earlier mutilated Captain Hunt are taken prisoner and their execution ordered. When a subordinate questions the order, the unit's Intelligence Officer, **Captain Alfred Taylor** (John Waters) reprimands him and then declares, "*Execute them...This is war, not a debutante's party...There are no rules here.*"

Yet, for political reasons, *Lord Kitchener* later **disloyally** ordered the court-martial of all three as **sacrificial lambs** in order to demonstrate Britain's good faith while a peace treaty was then being arranged between conflicting sides. Britain feared Germany intended to enter the war on behalf of the Dutch Boers, so a timely treaty was essential to avoid expanding the conflict on a greater scale. As *Kitchener* confided to his Executive Officer, **Colonel Hamilton** (Vincent Ball) in the film, "*If these three Australians have to be sacrificed to help bring about a peace conference, it's a small price to pay.*"

Morant and his two co-defendants were also **betrayed** by the British officers sitting in judgement over them at their murder trials. Their lawyer, **Major James Thomas** (Jack Thompson) heroically pleaded their case, but the verdict was predetermined in *Whitehall* long before any trial began. ("*The verdict came first and the trial came second,*" as Stalin's "*Moscow Show Trials*" were described by observers.) Although *Major Thomas* was given only one day to prepare their defense, in his summation, he brilliantly questioned the fairness of others sitting in judgement over the actions of combatants under fire, while enjoying the luxury of 20/20 hindsight and the relative security of being far removed from an enemy that would torture and mutilate prisoners of war.



Maj. James Thomas



Defendants' Kangaroo Court

Several former members of the unit were called as prosecution witnesses, each of whom held obvious grudges against the defendants. Some were expelled from the *Bushveldt Carbineers* for looting or other misconduct. Among these witnesses was **Corporal Sharp** (Chris Haywood,) who was overheard in a pub to drunkenly declare that he would *"...walk barefoot from Cape Town to Pietersburg to be on a firing party to shoot Lieutenant Handcock,"* one of the defendants. Yet, despite their prejudices their testimony was allowed, an obvious **betrayal** of the most basic notions of fairness by officers sitting in judgement over these defendants and holding their lives in their hands.

Finally, **Colonel Hall** was the commanding officer at Pietersburg, where several additional executions of prisoners occurred. The film portrays him as being fully aware of -- and a participant in -- Lord Kitchener's *scorched-Earth* and *no-prisoner* policies. *Colonel Hall* would have been invaluable as a witness for the defense, but was whisked away to India by the British Government to prevent his testimony. Thus, *Morant* and the other two defendants were also **betrayed** by the very British Government they and fellow Australians loyally served by risking their lives in a war in which they had no stake.

Ironically, while the three defendants were being held prisoner on murder charges at Pietersburg, the fort was attacked by a unit of mounted Boer guerillas. The attack came as a surprise in the early morning hours, and caught its garrison badly off-guard. To help assist in the fort's defense, all three defendants were released from jail and given rifles to defend it, and each acquitted themselves heroically. However, since the verdict was preordained, their loyalty to *The Crown* in the defense of Pietersburg was ruled to have no bearing on their cases.

As our American Revolutionary forebears belatedly realized by the 1770s, "*Perfidious Albion*" often viewed its colonial subjects as lesser beings and therefore expendable resources. This attitude clearly played a role in the trial of *Breaker Morant*, who at one point cynically acknowledged that three Australians "*won't be missed.*"

Breaker Morant's conviction and death sentence by a kangaroo court composed of British Officers made him a cause celebre in Australia. It may also have germinated a sentiment there, eventually blooming in other British colonies, questioning the wisdom of remaining a colony of the British Empire and subjects of The Crown.



-- by Earl P. Holt III