

***THE BOER WAR:  
ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE***

***LOOKING BACK ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR***  
**Craig Wilcox**

When Australians look back on the South African War we peer across a century of total war and of political and social transformation; over the barriers of dead heaped up by the world wars and backward through the evolution of our country and of ourselves from a frontier society of British colonists to a nation of citizens whose ethnic origins are legion and which is debating the severance of its last, symbolic ties with Britain. A minor war fought in a distant land to bring two republics under British rule stirs few of us today, unless we had ancestors who fought in it or unless we want to understand the full Australian experience of war. Still, the war lives on in the periphery of the collective Australian memory as an early tableau in the dramas of our military achievement and national growth, as a sort of prequel to Gallipoli. What interests most of us about the war are the ways in which it advanced or retarded or qualified our evolution toward nationhood. Did the imperial government in London nudge Australian governments into committing troops to South Africa? Did a distinctive Australian fighting man reveal himself during the war? Were Breaker Morant and his comrades Australian scapegoats of a hypocritical British Empire? The common answers to these questions are yes, yes and yes.

Australians have reinvented the South African War and indigenised it—not that we are alone in this. Indeed I borrow the words 'reinvention' and 'indigenisation' from Bill Nasson and another historian, Iain Smith, who have used them to comment on the same process at work in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> This process has happened there twice. From the 1920s to the 1960s Afrikaner writers and governments portrayed the war as one phase in the heroic struggle by the legitimate rulers of the region, the Afrikaners of course, to vanquish British domination, ignoring the involvement of black peoples in the war and discrediting white South Africans who fought for the British Empire. Today the government of a more inclusive South Africa proclaims that the war was a shared struggle by both black and white against British imperialism. No doubt that is a step forward, but it still ignores the fact that more South Africans, both black and white, fought for the British empire than against it.

If these South African reworkings of history seem too urgent, too transparent, for me to cast them as kin to how Australians might have constructed their part in the war, then let us look across the Tasman at our closest cousins. In October 1999 soldiers from the New Zealand Army marched through Wellington to mark the departure of New Zealand's first contingent to the war, symbolically affirming a unity, or at least a continuity, between the contingent and an army which did not exist until 40 years after the war. The governor-general praised the contingent for being the first batch of a quarter of a million New Zealanders who went to fight for their country overseas. The prime minister, even more ebulliently, congratulated them for starting New Zealand on its path to nationhood. As in Australia, as in South Africa, in New Zealand the war has become a curtain raiser to a present-day drama, part of the world we know and understand and approve of, fought by people just like us. If, as in the Australian and New Zealand cases, the immediate cause they fought for, the expansion of the British empire, now seems a dubious one, this is no matter. The greater cause is taken to be national integrity, one we would also fight for. Here, perhaps, is the real meaning of the process of the reinvention and indigenisation of the South African War, indeed of all wars. In a world of change a people talk among themselves, defining what they are like partly from what they are said to have done under fire, thereby reinforcing the duty of going to war, and finding a basis for passing on to the next generation certain values that remain non-negotiable amid the flood of social change.

Despite this process of reinvention and indigenisation we still rely more on assumptions than on scholarship for understanding how much, and in what ways, the South African War actually helped shape Australian politics and society a century ago. With the papers of Peter Burness, John Hirst and Luke Trainor we are well placed to move beyond those assumptions. But I want to strike out into different territory, reacting against the process of reinvention and indigenisation and inspired by the papers from scholars from Britain, New Zealand and South Africa, by the perspectives heard at other conferences in other countries marking the centenary of the start of the war, and by preliminary research which Cameron Simpson and I are doing toward a new history of Australians and the war. I want to interpret Australia's part in the war in a post-nationalist way, in a way that refuses to make instant sense to our narratives of war and national identity, and restores the Australian experience as a part of the experience of all English-speaking societies in the wars they fought a century ago. I will argue two main points; that Australians were more partners in the imperial cause than victims of it, and that Australians who fought in the war are better understood as imperial volunteers than as Australian soldiers.

### Partners in Empire

There are two bases to the popular characterisation of Australians in the South African War as victims. The first base rests on the view that Australians went to war indifferently, even reluctantly, in October 1899. It was a commonplace in labour and radical circles by 1902 that Australians, like other white citizens of the British Empire, had been nudged, even manipulated, into sending their men to fight in South Africa. That view, and its catchphrase of 'manufactured spontaneity', became academic orthodoxy in Australia during the 1970s after historians Chris Connolly and Laurie Field traced how London urged the sometimes reluctant Australian colonial governments into recruiting and despatching the initial contingents, and after Connolly went on to assess Australian opinion on the war as having been largely apathetic.<sup>2</sup>

New scholarship is beginning to undermine this view. Carman Miller concludes it was 'the strident demands of ... pro-war advocates, not the clandestine machinations of a handful of imperial conspirators', which prompted Canada's first commitment in 1899.<sup>3</sup> Stephen Clarke suggests that something like the same local pressure was at work here in Australia. That pressure was part of a great social movement. For a few brief years, at the close of the last century and the start of this one, many English-speaking people went into partnership with the aggressively imperial firms which temporarily enjoyed a controlling interest in Washington and London. Among the consequences of this partnership were the South African War and the Spanish-American War, two similar conflicts in which wealthy, democratic empires assaulted provincial oligarchies, leading to annexations of new colonies in which white-skinned English speakers were a small minority. In both wars victory was arguably beyond the reach of the relatively small regular armies controlled by Washington and London. In any case, many military thinkers and community leaders believed it was time that ordinary citizens broke free from the militia and volunteer military traditions that confined their men to part-time drill and home service, and fall in behind their regulars as some kind of auxiliary force that would approximate the reserve divisions of Europe's conscript armies. This was the broad context—and not British scheming to lay hands on colonial troops, as some historians have argued—for the despatch to South Africa and Cuba of contingents of citizen volunteers to fight beside the British and United States Armies.

I do not want to suggest that all Australians entered into this partnership, or that every Australian was bursting to fight in South Africa. For most of the war not even a majority of Australians were so inclined. But the minority who were inclined were no less significant than in any other English-speaking society, and for a minor war, in an age when communities were more important than governments in creating and sustaining defence initiatives, that minority proved sufficient to propel, perhaps to compel, Australian participation in October 1899 and for the rest of the war, and to bring Australians into the same martial orbit as their English-speaking cousins. To expect colonial governments to have done much apart from react to such pressure is to misunderstand their importance a century ago. Their role was to channel pro-war activity, to regulate it and to assert jurisdiction over its most obvious product, those

Australians who put on uniform and sailed away to fight. And many Australians saw no reason to heed this assertion, such was the looseness of Australian, as opposed to imperial, loyalty. Five of the twenty thousand Australians who fought in the war did so in non-Australian contingents; and Melanie Oppenheimer might be able to tell us whether the proportion of donations to imperial as opposed to local patriotic funds was similar.

For most of the war a coalition of loyalists and opportunists conducted Australia's war effort in South Africa. Loyalists, concentrated in middle class communities, watched the war loom, deprecated insults to the British flag, and began enlisting and contributing to patriotic funds even before the fighting began. Not all Australian loyalists were confined to watching the war from afar. A thousand or more Australian men were working in South Africa before the war, mostly in mines on the Rand. Some of these had formed a so-called Australian Corps to support the Jameson raiders at the close of 1895. Many, perhaps most, helped form and join volunteer units raised as war began, and a mining engineer and timber merchant from Western Australia, Walter Karri Davies, helped raise and lead the most politically and militarily significant of them, the Imperial Light Horse. While loyalists led the Australian war effort early in the war, opportunists were equally prominent later on. Australia suffered its worst drought on record during the war, and was pulling itself out of the financial depression of the early 1890s. Enlistment offered steady pay to rural men unable to find regular work and the army offered lucrative contracts to manufacturers, insurance companies, horse breeders and farmers. Australian horse breeders sold over 21,000 horses to the army by mid 1902, and during 1901 one in every ten pounds earned from exports was earned from sales to South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Opportunism largely explains the flood of recruits for Australian contingents raised in 1901 and 1902, a time when the outcome of the war was never in doubt and revelations of farm burning and concentration camps were fuelling anti-war activity. Australian governments tried to regulate opportunistic enlistment; they promoted opportunistic war business without hesitation. Edmund Barton's government assiduously puffed Australian firms to the War Office and Army headquarters in South Africa, and in January 1902 the governor-general warned London that his ministers believed that farmers and manufacturers had 'not received adequate consideration in connection with [war] contracts'.<sup>5</sup>

The conduct of the war passed briefly out of the hands of the coalition of loyalists and opportunists during the six months from Black Week in December 1899 to Mafeking Night in May 1900. During Black Week the British Army lost the battles of Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso, raising the prospect of an eclipse of British power in southern Africa or even of some rival great power, Germany perhaps, entering the war on the Boer side. Overnight the war seemed to change its character and importance. Looked at from Manchester, Montreal or Moreton Bay, Black Week seemed to promise disaster unless the empire's white citizens rallied. A crisis seemed at hand, one that London had had no hand in manufacturing.

Most Australians, like most of their cousins elsewhere in the empire, suddenly joined the loyalist camp and fell in behind the war effort. They included former opponents of the war such as Andrew Dawson, Labor Party leader in Queensland and founder of the Charters Towers Republican Association. Now came genuine spontaneity and popular commitment, as governments and private citizens raised further contingents for the war, far outnumbering those raised in October 1899. Home-bound militias, volunteer forces and rifle clubs expanded in anticipation of sudden attack. Donations to patriotic funds rocketed upward. Remaining critics of the war were shouted down, sometimes intimidated, burnt in effigy or even beaten. War news was eagerly imbibed, and the string of imperial victories from February to June 1900 that promised release from danger were frantically celebrated. This popular martial mood did not survive long after the most frantic of those celebrations which followed news of the relief of Mafeking. The relief, along with the occupation of Pretoria two weeks later, seemed to signal the end of any crisis, and the war effort gradually reverted to the hands of the old coalition of loyalists and opportunists. Still, when seeking to understand how Australians went to war in 1899 it is a mistake to assume that popular indifference extended throughout the war, or to assume that when it did prevail it was telling. From Black Week to Mafeking Night most Australians were swept up into an imperial partnership, and for the rest of the war enough Australians entered into the partnership to conduct an energetic war effort. The only victims in this willing process were the businesses which lost out on the bonanza of war contracts.

The second basis for characterising Australians as victims in the war is the limited control which their governments and military leaders exercised over the course and conduct of the fighting and over the treatment of their own soldiers. Here the nationalist view is on firmer ground, though the lack of control was not absolute and, compared with black Africans who aided the imperial cause, Australian soldiers were firmly in the camp of privilege.

Australians exercised a small degree of influence over the course of the war and over its denouement, though more often invisibly with other imperial subjects rather than visibly as Australians. The Australians on the Rand who helped agitate against Boer rule before the war and who formed volunteer units during the Jameson raid and as war loomed helped bring about the conflict, antagonising the Transvaal government and providing Milner, Chamberlain and other empire-builders with supposed victims of Boer oppression whose cause should be championed. After the war thousands of Australians settled in South Africa, participating in an imperial scheme to Anglicise the conquered republics and secure them for the empire forever. By 1904 Tasmanian sheep were grazing at a stud farm at Colesberg where Tasmanian men had died fighting four years earlier, a former trooper of the Australian Horse was farming a property called Monaro, east of Bloemfontein, and more than 5000 Australians were working on the Rand, a mass influx that prompted Donald Denoon to wonder whether they injected the aspirations of Australian labour into white South African society.<sup>6</sup> Australian governments made a small contribution to the question of what peace terms should be offered the Boers. London did not formally consult Australia, but in mid-1900 Australian premiers cabled their support for the decision to annexe the conquered republics, and as the war was ending Milner was told that the Australian Government would be satisfied only with unconditional surrender by Boers remaining in the field.

Australian governments had even less direct control over their men in uniform than they had over the course of the war, but it would be wrong to see Australian soldiers as victims in consequence of this. As volunteers they enjoyed higher pay than British Army soldiers and partial freedom from military discipline. And as colonial volunteers, they benefited from a metropolitan anxiety not to offend provincial sensibilities unnecessarily. Then there was the protection that came from being part of a great imperial enterprise. Kitchener and Brodrick might have had Morant and Handcock shot for murdering prisoners, but Milner and Roberts saved another Australian, Charles Cox, from the same fate after he had had a black servant shot for no good reason, prompting local protest and a murder trial. George Witton, Breaker Morant's youngest accomplice, and three young Victorians who talked mutiny against their British commander after the ambush at Wilmansrust might have been sent to English military gaols for offences that might not seem to warrant such grim punishment, but the Wilmansrust mutineers were promptly released once the Army legal department reviewed their case, while 100 or more injured or sick Australian soldiers were sent to English hospitals for treatment, some to be subsidised there by private charity. Australians might not have held any high commands in the army during the war, but Australians generally commanded Australian units, Tom Price and Harry Vials, two competent Australian colonels, briefly led mixed forces of Australian and British troops, and several Australians held senior administrative posts in Cape Town. If we count Henry Pilkington as an Australian—he was a British Army officer who had been posted to Australia as secretary to a governor before commanding Western Australia's second contingent—then an Australian held the senior post of commander of the paramilitary South African Constabulary in the Orange Free State.

If there was any division in the Army between oppressors and victims, it was the division between white soldiers and black labourers and farmers—a division which, of course, placed Australians firmly in the former camp. The Army depended on thousands of non-whites to drive its wagons, help find its fodder and food and sometimes to do its scouting. Bill Nasson has written that white soldiers new to South Africa rapidly absorbed the local settlers' view that all manual work should be left to blacks.<sup>7</sup> Australians certainly did, despite coming from a society that prided itself on performing its own labour. Some Australians also absorbed local views on how these labourers should be treated—or perhaps they imported folk wisdom from the Australian bush. Native villages were seen as stores of food and fodder to be plundered. 'If you have had nothing to eat since last night, and see no prospect of anything to-night', one Australian explained, 'you ride up to your kraal ... draw your carbine from its bucket, insert a cartridge in the breech, and rest it across your legs. The movement is not lost on the head of

the household'.<sup>8</sup> The supremacy which Australians and other white soldiers enjoyed over black Africans was generally exercised more benevolently than brutally. Still, supremacy it was, and a vivid indicator of the real status of Australians a century ago as partners in the British Empire, albeit junior ones. When Rudyard Kipling portrayed Australian soldiers in a short story written in 1900 he did so through the eyes of an Indian servant, whose exclusion from the world of the white man enabled him to recognise them for what they were—in his memorable words, 'a new brand of Sahib'.<sup>9</sup>

### Imperial Volunteers

Just as Australians a century ago were more partners in empire than victims of it, their men in uniform were more imperial volunteers than Australian soldiers.

It is not easy to argue this in the face of a century of effort to construct the character of the Australian soldier. We like to see Australians in South Africa as the first men to exhibit this character, said to comprise initiative, individuality, mateship and courage according to one commentator.<sup>10</sup> We have eyewitness descriptions of Australian distinctiveness not only from Australians but from British observers like Kipling, who described Australian soldiers as 'Dark, tall men, most excellent horsemen, hot and angry, waging war as war, and drinking tea as a sandhill drinks water'.<sup>11</sup> Then there is the praise from British generals, who routinely described Australians or all colonial troops as natural scouts, natural horsemen, natural soldiers.

Certainly a distinctive outlook was found among many men of the Australian contingents, and certainly their scouting and riding abilities sometimes shone brightly. But Australians were not always distinctive and superior, and Australia's open spaces and democratic ethos were unlikely to have been the main influences on them when they were. After all, Australian soldiers were more likely to have lived in cities and towns than in the bush, and highly likely to have been born and raised in Britain or to have grown up in a household under adults who had been. The difference between Tommy Cornstalk and Tommy Atkins was less geographic than institutional—the difference between the citizen soldier and the professional.

We have Ian Beckett as our guide here. His 1991 book *The Amateur Military Tradition* sketched the history of a British military institution, citizen soldiering, which predated the British Army by several centuries and endured alongside it, characterised by community patronage, individual initiative and self-discipline.<sup>12</sup> Citizen soldiering transplanted successfully to Britain's settler colonies, taking firm root in new lands where significant regular forces had no permanent existence, it formed the basis of Australian military efforts until 1945. During the second half of the nineteenth century a mass community concern for defence in all English-speaking countries brought hundreds of thousands of men into volunteer forces, voluntary militias and rifle clubs, by then the main expressions of citizen soldiering and more libertarian than their predecessors. Some volunteers formed mounted rifle units, claiming that civilians, especially fanners and frontiersmen, were the ideal raw material for this new kind of cavalry that rode horses for mobility rather than the charge. It was this volunteer strand of citizen soldiering which formed the institutional base by which the English-speaking people went into partnership with the imperial firms at the close of the nineteenth century, and the contingents sent to South Africa or raised there were almost all volunteer units in organisation and culture.

They made up two-fifths of the half-million strong imperial army during the war. A little over half the volunteers came from Britain, a little over a quarter came from southern Africa, and a little over a fifth came from Canada, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>13</sup> There were militiamen from England and medical staff from New South Wales, City Imperial Volunteers and Cape Town Highlanders, infantry from Quebec and cyclists from Queensland, and above all mounted riflemen. Reflecting tactical need and volunteer fashion, most volunteers were this new breed of horse soldier, and their bewildering variety of names—horsemen and light horsemen, guides and scouts, dragoons and carbineers—disguises their similar duties and, perhaps, their importance; together they made up around half the army's mounted troops. Mounted riflemen from the colonies were said to bring unique frontier qualities into play; Erskine Childers, a former City Imperial Volunteer, thought they 'seemed by intuition to grasp

the possibilities of a union of the rifle with the horse'.<sup>14</sup> But were these qualities, this intuition, of British origin? 'The mounted rifleman', Henry Havelock wrote a generation before in 1867, was 'the union and full development of the two strongest tastes, most deeply rooted and most ardently cherished, that every Briton has had from his boyhood ... love of the horse' and 'love of the gun'.<sup>15</sup>

After the war Erskine Childers hailed the 'great throng' of volunteers as 'an army in itself'.<sup>16</sup> Not only numbers but shared institutions and expectations gave that great throng its identity, marking it out from the regular soldiers of the British Army they fought beside. Most were taller, fitter, better educated than Tommy. Perhaps they shared a mental superiority too. 'We had two great advantages', judged Sidney Peel, an imperial yeoman from Britain, 'the men as a whole were of fine physique, and they were enthusiastic, and keenly eager to learn'.<sup>17</sup> Volunteers interrupted their civilian lives to enlist, for a limited period and for higher pay than the regulars, because the imperial cause seemed just or even vital to them, or because a short term of military service seemed opportune or profitable or exciting. Individual initiative, folk wisdom and local knowledge were esteemed among volunteers, necessarily so when formal training was rudimentary at best. And all volunteers, not just the colonials among them, had civilian ideas of discipline.

One soldier from New South Wales justified a protest against an officer by saying, 'We Australians have more military privileges than ordinary soldiers have'.<sup>18</sup> This was to nationalise an institutional distinction. All volunteers in South Africa asserted traditional citizen soldier rights against military discipline and authority. Sidney Peel recorded how his unit would not tolerate what he described as attempts 'to turn us into regular troops'—attempts which were resisted by evasion and humour, occasionally by disobedience. 'We wore them down eventually', Peel smiled.<sup>19</sup> Volunteers regularly protested about the quality of remounts, inconsistent pay levels, lack of overcoats and blankets, lack of recognition for deeds of bravery, attempts to prolong their enlistment—even attempts to keep them at the front for their agreed term of enlistment.

If colonial nationalism prompted some Australians to want their soldiers in South Africa formed into Australian regiments and brigades, the volunteer tradition combined with the bush legend and intercolonial rivalry to prompt others to oppose such combinations. They saw their soldiers as bands of independent scouts who should act as the eyes and ears of the regulars, not try to imitate them. One patron of a New South Wales bushmen contingent complained when his unit was brigaded with other Australians that 'we understood that we were [raising] five hundred scouts, not five hundred fighting men who were to fight in a bunch. These men were to be the advance post of an army, on account of their bush knowledge; they were to be drafted off in twenties or fifties to the different [line] regiments'.<sup>20</sup>

Late in the war Edmund Barton wanted the Australian Commonwealth Horse—the last batch of Australian contingents for the war, and whose battalions effectively comprised Australia's first expeditionary force—to go to South Africa in separate squadrons as glamorous scouts. Perhaps it was London or London's military man in Australia, Edward Hutton, that dissuaded him. At any rate, it was generally British Army officers who consolidated Australian units once they arrived in South Africa.

Seeing Australian soldiers as volunteers encourages us to move beyond our usual focus on British praise for Australian skill as scouts and horsemen and to examine their performance more critically, in the context of the performance of volunteers generally in the war. Australian feats like the dogged pursuit of De Wet in February 1901 and the defence of Elands River Post in August 1900 were remarkable, but no more remarkable, or ultimately war-winning, than the pursuit of Viljeon by the Scottish Horse and other units under Benson during July 1901, or the defence of Wepener in April 1900 by 2000 Cape volunteers. The best scouts in the country were more often South African than Australian. Nor did Australians prove the natural soldiers that many said they were. Like the bulk of volunteers, they arrived at the front with little training and under loose discipline, ignorant of the terrain and its resources, riding unsteady or unfamiliar horses. This was no recipe for success. They hailed themselves as demon riders, but when a British mounted infantryman fell in with 50 Queenslanders he was surprised to observe that only one could ride well.<sup>21</sup> The result of lack of training and riding ability was often an early gift to the Boers of rifles and horses. Many volunteer units

underwent ambushes in their first months in action, the Australians no less often than others. The two most spectacular episodes occurred at Lindley in May 1900, involving 500 Irish yeomanry, and at Wilmansrust in June 1901, involving 350 Victorian Mounted Riflemen. Experience and the removal of the worst officers, not reliance on natural ability, improved volunteer performance, and after a year in the field, judged one general, volunteer mounted rifle units held more than twice their original value.<sup>22</sup> But at that point, as enlistments expired, they were lost to the army.

Given the weaknesses of the volunteers and the dearth of food and fodder in South Africa, we might ask whether the volunteers' presence was redundant, even harmful, to the imperial cause. To pile up volunteers was not necessarily to help the British Army to win the war; as London pointed out to Lord Roberts, 'every additional unit not only robs this country, but increases your difficulties in the matter of transport and supplies'.<sup>23</sup> Stephen Badsey has noted that Douglas Haig thought most volunteers should go home. The British cavalry was capable of fighting as mounted riflemen, and maintaining dozens of barely trained auxiliary mounted units in the field in a barren country, Haig felt, simply strained resources so greatly that the army was bogged down and victory delayed. Australians and other volunteer mounted riflemen were meant to give wings to the British Army in South Africa. If Haig was right, they merely gave it an anchor.

### **Bushveldt Carbineers' Episode Reconsidered**

If Australians were more partners in empire than victims of it, more imperial volunteers than Australian soldiers, how then should we interpret the crimes, trial and execution of Breaker Morant and his accomplices—the one incident from the war which every Australian remembers, and in a way which allows us to share honours with the Boers both as superior soldiers to the plodding British and as victims of their dubious empire? Let me conclude with a post-nationalist interpretation of the incident, partly derived from a 1987 book about Morant edited by a South African historian, Arthur Davey, of which few Australians seem aware.<sup>24</sup>

Morant himself perfectly represents the pre-national character of most Australians of his day. He lived half his life in England, half in Australia, and his last thoughts were of his fiancée in Devon. He never thought to claim immunity from prosecution as an Australian. He turned to the old and passionate rhetoric of Irish opposition to the empire, not to the newer, shallower rhetoric of the *Sydney Bulletin*, when he felt betrayed by the cause he had fought for. He ended one of his last letters only semi-humorously with the epitaph, 'God Save Oireland'.<sup>25</sup>

Morant's unit, the Bushveldt Carbineers, was one of dozens of so-called irregular units brought into being for six or twelve months in South Africa during the war which had an institutional character as a volunteer unit but no national character at all. Raised by local loyalists in the northern Transvaal to patrol the newly conquered district, the Carbineers were recruited from former members of disbanded volunteer units, often from Australia, who had not yet had their fill of war and were attracted by the high pay being offered—opportunism as a motive loomed larger for these men than loyalism. Some may have hoped to settle in the district after they had pacified it, which is to say after they had cleared opponents of British rule from their farms. The Bushveldt Carbineers were a cross between a mobile arm of the British army garrison and prototype Black and Tans, relying on local intelligence and local loyalists to find and arrest armed Boers, if necessary defeat them in battle, and with luck inherit their property.

Patrolling beyond the eye of professional officers, at the mercy of conflicting intelligence, local feuds and anyone who could speak Afrikaans and the local black languages, the Carbineers had no professional training and no culture of military discipline to fall back on when the job proved harder than expected. Terror was the handiest weapon of last resort, one that mounted auxiliaries with European armies had long deployed and that white frontiersmen from the Australian bush, the Canadian prairies and the South Africa veld had some experience with. It was not surprising that one detachment of Bushveldt Carbineers stationed at Fort Edward began to play the auxiliary's ancient role of licensed murderer, the modern equivalents of the Hungarian hussars with the bag of human heads dangling from their saddles.

If the British Army's right to try Morant and other Bushveldt Carbineers officers from Fort Edward offends us, it ought to be because the accused were civilian volunteers rather than Australians. Australians, indeed, were prominent among their accusers, indicating the army's truly imperial composition. Key evidence was gathered by Frederick de Bertodano, a British militia officer attached to Army headquarters who had been born, raised and educated in Australia. A Carbineer private from Western Australia, RM Cochrane, led 15 of his comrades, mostly Australians, to testify against Morant and the others. Far from holding any reservations about imperial jurisdiction over Australian soldiers, Cochrane and the others demanded justice be done on the grounds that 'We cannot return home with the stigma of these crimes [committed by our officers] attached to *our* names'.<sup>26</sup>

Kitchener, alarmed by the violence being shown by several volunteer units on the fringes of the war, was eager to punish some as a warning to others. Backed by the Secretary for War in London, he refused to reprieve Morant and Handcock from their death sentence. There was no singling out of Australians in this; George Witton's death sentence was commuted to a prison sentence, while the South African intelligence officer involved in the murders, Alfred Taylor, would certainly have been shot if white witnesses had come forward to corroborate what black witnesses had said and if there had been no doubts about the court's jurisdiction over a semi-military official.

Probably the common reaction in Australia to the news of the punishments meted out to Morant, Handcock and Witton was embarrassment, if not shame, that men from their country had murdered prisoners, though the gaoling of Witton, who had only followed orders, created unease. But to ask about an Australian reaction alone is to ignore the imperial reaction to what was an imperial event. Across the white empire men and women discussed the case, generally agreeing that Morant and Handcock had got what they deserved and that Witton ought to be released. Committees to petition on Witton's behalf were formed in South Africa as well as Australia, and it was not an Australian but a wealthy Cape politician, James Logan, who travelled to London and secured Witton's release.

Although we should not exaggerate its importance at the time, the voice of nascent Australian nationalism was heard responding to the Bushveldt Carbineers' episode. Australians had been praised for using brute force in South Africa when the situation demanded it, by no less an authority than Kipling. Now they were to be punished for it. 'Any feeling I have in the matter', one Australian wrote, 'is in favour of the executed officers'. Why weren't British officers who had shot prisoners not also tried? he asked. 'A self evident answer', he concluded,

may be found in the supposition that the other officers implicated possessed wealth, rank and political influence enough to shield themselves from ... punishment ... the Australian officers sprung by merit from the ranks were ... poor and without official backing and were therefore chosen on that very account as scape-goats to carry by the ending of their lives the misdeeds of a collection of British officers ... all the feelings I may entertain as to the injustice of the execution will not restore the poor fellows into life again. Though their sad and undeserved fate will ever awaken feelings of regret.<sup>27</sup>

Thus did one Australian decide why Morant and Handcock had been killed for displaying the very lack of scruples which had prompted Kipling to high praise. He was not alone in his thinking. Some Australians were already turning their backs on their new status as junior partners in empire, and were on the way to seeing themselves as innocent victims of a hypocritical British Empire.

## Endnotes

1. Bill Nasson, *The South African War 1899-1902* (London: Edward Arnold, 1999), 269; my notes from Iain Smith, 'A century of controversy over the South African war', University of the Orange Free State conference, The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902; a reappraisal, Bloemfontein, 12 October 1999.
2. CN Connolly, 'Manufacturing "Spontaneity": The Australian Offers of Troops for the Boer War', *Historical Studies* 18: 70 (April 1978), 106-17, and 'Class, Birthplace, Loyalty: Australian Attitudes to the Boer War', *Historical Studies* 18:71(October 1978), 210-32, LM Field, *The Forgotten War: Australia and the Boer War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 1-78, 129-51.
3. Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal & Kingston: Canadian War Museum/McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 48.
4. Wray Vamplew (ed), *Australians: Historical Statistics* (Sydney: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, 1987), 193; Wilson to Under-Secretary of State Colonial Office, 20 June 1902, CO 418/24 f 527, Public Record Office, Kew (hereinafter PRO).
5. Hopetoun to Chamberlain, 4 January 1902, CO 418/18 f 14, PRO.
6. Donald Denoon, 'The Isolation of Australian History', *Historical Studies* 22: 87 (October 1986), 256.
7. Bill Nasson, 'Tommy Atkins in South Africa', in Peter Warwick (ed), *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (London: Longman, 1980), 131.
8. JHM Abbott, *Tommy Cornstalk* (London: Longmans, Green, 1902), 47-48, 51-52.
9. Rudyard Kipling, 'A Sahib's War', reprinted in *Traffics and Discoveries* (London: Macmillan, 1949), 87.
10. Brigadier John Howard in Ralph Sutton (ed), *For Queen and Empire* (Sydney: New South Wales Military Historical Society, 1974), foreword.
11. Kipling, 'A Sahib's War', 87.
12. Ian FW Beckett, *The Amateur Military Tradition 1558-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).
13. LS Amery (ed), *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902*, vol VI (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1909), 279. These figures are not precise as they count enlistments, not bodies.
14. Erskine Childers, *War and the Arme Blanche* (London: Edward Arnold, 1910), 217.
15. Henry Havelock, *Three Main Military Questions of the Day* (London: Longmans, Green, 1867), 65.
16. Childers, *War and the Arme Blanche*, 54.
17. Sidney Peel, *Trooper 8008 IY* (London: Longmans, 1901), 8.
18. Alfred Cook quoted in minutes of evidence 85, 'Report From the Select Committee on Administration of the Military Department', *Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly (NSW)*, 1900, vol 4: 261.
19. Peel, *Trooper 8008 IY*, 26.
20. John Atkinson, quoted in minutes of evidence, 173, 'Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Members of New South Wales Contingents', *Parliamentary Papers (NSW)*, 1906, vol 3: 65.
21. Murray Cosby Jackson, *A Soldier's Diary* (London: Goschen, 1913), 298-304.
22. Herbert Plumer, minutes of evidence, 337, 'Report of His Majesty's Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Military Preparations and Other Matters Connected with the War in South Africa', *Parliamentary Papers (United Kingdom)* 1904, 40, Cd, 1791.
23. Lansdowne to Roberts, 8 January 1900, 7101/23/33, Roberts Papers, National Army Museum, London.
24. Arthur Davey (ed), *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1987).
25. Reproduced in F Renar, *Bushman and Buccaneer* (Sydney: Bulletin, 1902), 30.
26. Reproduced in Davey, *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers*, 81; my emphasis.
27. Makins to Under-Secretary of State, Colonial Office, 28 June 1902, CO 418/25 ff 734-35, PRO.