

Scapegoat of the Empire:

George Witton and the Breaker Morant Affair

MARK CRYLE, FRYER LIBRARY MANAGER, EXAMINES THE ROLE OF GEORGE WITTON IN SHAPING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE BREAKER MORANT AFFAIR.

Above:
George Witton, possibly taken at his brother's property at Lancefield, Victoria in 1907. This photo appears in one of Fryer's copies of *Scapegoats of the Empire* and appears not to have been published previously.

Bruce Beresford's 1980 feature film *Breaker Morant* retells an incident that took place during the Anglo-Boer War, in which a number of Australian officers in a unit under British command, the Bushveldt Carbineers, were court martialled for shooting Boer prisoners of war. In the closing sequence of the film, the character George Witton is standing at a train station on his way to prison. He hears the volley of rifle fire as his Australian mates, Harry Morant and Peter Handcock, are executed by a British firing squad. He too had been sentenced to death but learns subsequently that "Lord Kitchener has been pleased to commute your sentence to penal servitude for life." A caption then appears on the screen: "George Witton was released from Lewes Prison (England) after serving 3 years of his sentence. He returned to Australia and wrote a book – *Scapegoats of the Empire*. He died in 1943."¹

¹ *Breaker Morant* (Hendon, S Australia: South Australian Film Corporation, 1980), video. Witton was actually released from Portland prison and died in 1942.

The Witton character in the film epitomises naive imperial idealism. He is a young man who "believed in the British Empire"² and yet becomes a repudiated victim of it. It is a powerful trope in the mythology of Australia's "war of independence" from Britain which surfaces again 13 years later when the sacrifice of thousands of Australian soldiers on the beaches of Gallipoli is so readily attributed to the incompetence of their British commanders. Like that of the Anzacs, Witton's "innocence" is transformed into cynicism, not just by the general war experience, but specifically by the callous machinery of the British military, in this case, under the command of the arch villain, Lord Horatio Kitchener. Beresford's film suggested that it was the British and not the Boers who were the "real" enemy, and brought the Morant legend of betrayed colonial enthusiast back into public consciousness. But the story was not always Morant's; at the time it was George Witton who focused the Australian

² Ibid

public's attention on this brittle moment in Anglo-Australian relations. Who was the "real" George Witton, and what role did he play in shaping our understanding of the "Breaker Morant" affair? The Fryer Library collection provides important insights into Witton's life and the events surrounding the publication of his book.

George Ramsdale Witton was born on 28 June 1874 at Warrnambool in Victoria. He volunteered for military service in the Boer War and in May 1900 sailed with the Victorian Imperial Bushmen for South Africa. Witton's initial tour of duty was hampered by a severe knee injury that limited him to barracks duties. He recovered sufficiently to transfer to the newly formed Bushveldt Carbineers, which he joined at the rank of lieutenant on 13 July 1901 at Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal.

On 24 October 1901 Witton, along with a number of other BVC officers including Harry "Breaker" Morant and Peter Handcock, was arrested. Witton was charged with shooting Boer prisoners of war on two separate occasions. Morant and Handcock were charged with the murder of a missionary, the Reverend C A D Heese. Separate hearings were held for each charge. Morant and Handcock were acquitted on the Heese charge but were notified of the guilty verdict on the other charges on 26 February 1902. They were shot the following day.

Witton never knew how close he himself came to the firing squad. Kitchener had judged Witton's role in the killings subordinate and so commuted his death sentence, but others saw no need for leniency. The British Under Secretary for War, St John Broderick, wrote privately to Kitchener:

It is a most deplorable performance and, if it gets out, as I fear it will, even the strong measures we are taking will not undo the disgrace it inflicts on our Colonial Forces. I should myself have been inclined to shoot all these officers.³

The news did, of course, "get out" reaching Australia in March 1902. Both *The Age* and the *Argus* gave accounts of the affair. At this stage, however, the story

³ St John Broderick to Lord Kitchener, 17 February 1902 cited in Kit Denton, *Closed File* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1983), 114.

did not generate great public indignation. Quick to capitalise on the topicality of the issue, *Sydney Bulletin* journalist, Frank Fox, under the pen name, "Frank Renar", published "the true facts" of the Bushveldt Carbineers affair. *Bushman and Buccaneer*⁴ was published just six weeks after the news had broken. It was based in part on manuscripts and letters received from Major Robert Lenehan, the BVC's Australian commanding officer who had also been court-martialled, but it also invented dialogue to colour the executions with fearless heroism:

Morant scornfully refused a bandage for his eyes and looked down the muzzles of the guns without fear. "Shoot straight" he said "don't make a mess of it."⁵

Fox had no access to accounts from eyewitnesses of Morant's and Handcock's executions. Lenehan, Fox's principal source, certainly had not been there, and so the mythologising of the incident had begun.

From South Africa Witton was taken to Britain to serve his prison term. He immediately began petitioning the authorities for his release. Meanwhile, a Witton Defence Committee had been organised back in Australia. It was coordinated by his brother, Ernest, who had obtained legal opinion in Witton's favour from Isaac Isaacs, the prominent Melbourne lawyer later to become Australia's Attorney-General. Isaacs' opinion accompanied a petition for Witton's release signed by 100,000⁶ Australians and forwarded to King Edward VII in October 1902. It was a significant demonstration of support from a population of only four million but did not sway the War Office.

Witton also had sympathisers in South Africa with its large resident population of ex-Australians and New Zealanders who

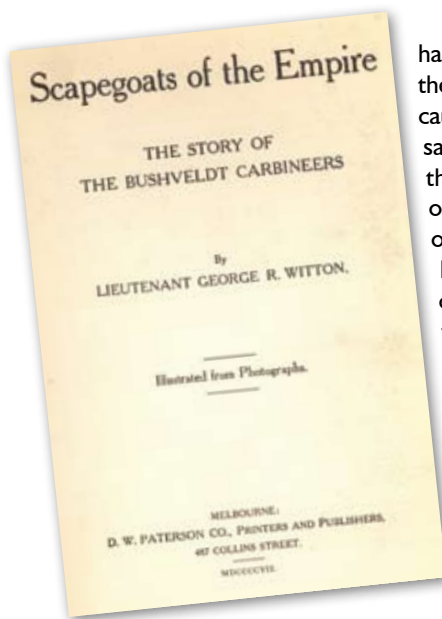


Above: Breaker Morant dies game in front of the firing squad. This Norman Lindsay cartoon appeared in *Bushman and Buccaneer* / Renar (Frank Fox), 1902.

⁴ Frank Renar, *Bushman and Buccaneer: Harry Morant, his Ventures and Verses* (Sydney: Dunn, 1902).

⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

⁶ Witton claimed 100,000 signatories (George R. Witton, *Scapegoats of the Empire: the story of the Bushveldt Carbineers* (Melbourne: D W Paterson, 1907), 207). A contemporary newspaper account says 80,000 (*Taranaki Herald*, 6 December 1902, 5).



Above:
Title page of *Scapegoats of the Empire*.

had migrated there earlier or stayed at the conclusion of the Boer War.⁷ Witton's cause was promoted by the Cape Town satirical weekly, *The Owl*, which compared the hapless Victorian's treatment to that of Alfred Dreyfus, the French cavalry officer wrongfully imprisoned for spying in 1894.⁸ The campaign for Witton's release continued to gain momentum accruing wide support across the Empire.⁹

In July 1904, James Logan, an influential member of the Cape Legislative Council, travelled to London and began privately lobbying members of the British House of Commons at The Carlton Club.¹⁰ During July and August 1904, the Conservative member for Oldham, Winston Churchill, himself a former prisoner of the Boers during the war, put a number of parliamentary questions to the Colonial Secretary about Witton's ongoing incarceration. This two-pronged campaign was successful¹¹ and Witton was freed on 10 August. In a bizarre gesture of repudiation of the original conviction, Logan personally attended Witton's release from Portland Prison and took him to his Scottish estate for some grouse shooting.

On his return to Australia in late 1904, Witton campaigned to redeem his reputation. He told *The Age* he demanded "justice" and wanted his "character cleared".¹² He retired to his brother's property at Lancefield in Victoria to write the defence that became *Scapegoats of the Empire*. Witton had the benefit of the trial notes made by James F Thomas who had acted as counsel for the accused and who had since returned to his law practice in Tenterfield, N S W, but his account could not escape the mythologising tendencies already shown by Fox. In fact, Fox seems to have been one of his sources, as the close likeness of several passages suggests. Perhaps the most famous line in the trial (one that is quoted in most accounts of the

⁷ Arthur Davey (ed), *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers* (Cape Town: Van Riebeck Society, 1987), 162.

⁸ *The Owl*, 11 December 1903, cited in Davey, *Breaker Morant*, 162.

⁹ Witton claims that there were petitioners from 14 countries, *Scapegoats*, 211.

¹⁰ Davey, *Breaker Morant*, 165.

¹¹ Davey, *Breaker Morant*, 165. It is also claimed that Mrs Alice Keppel, a mistress of Edward VII interceded on Witton's behalf. Margaret Carnegie and Frank Shields, *In Search of Breaker Morant: Balladist and Bushveldt Carbineer* (Armadale, Vic: [Carnegie & Shields], 1979), 168.

¹² *The Age*, 12 November 1904, 11.

affair including Kit Denton's 1973 novel, *The Breaker*,¹³ Kenneth Ross's 1979 play, *Breaker Morant*,¹⁴ and Bruce Beresford's film) is Harry Morant's implicit declaration that whatever the rule book says, war (especially guerrilla war) does not allow for punctilios and niceties. Witton writes:

"Was your court of the trial of Visser constituted like this?," asked the president. "and did you observe paragraph [blank space] of section [blank space] of the King's Regulations?" "Was it the same as this?" fiercely answered Morant. "No it was not half so handsome. As to rules and sections, we had no Red Book; and knew nothing about them. But remember this. We were out fighting the Boers, not sitting comfortably behind barb-wire entanglements; we got them and shot them under rule 303."¹⁵

Witton, of course, had been in the courtroom as had his lawyer, James F Thomas, so either could have accurately remembered this striking assertion. However, the whole passage is so close to Frank Fox's account which went to press in June 1902 well before either Witton or Thomas returned to Australia as to suggest that Fox's book, rather than Witton's memory or Thomas' trial transcripts, was the real source of this defiant assertion. It is very possible that the famous "Rule 303" line was never spoken by Harry Morant at all, but was a product of Frank Fox's rhetorical imagination.

By 15 June 1905 Witton had completed a first draft of the manuscript and was seeking a publisher. T J Symons of the Melbourne publisher, George Robertson & Co, had suggested to Witton that he approach A G Stephens,¹⁶ the noted critic and former literary editor of *The Bulletin*. Witton's correspondence, held in the A G Stephens collections in Fryer Library and the Mitchell Library, give us new insights into the writing and publication of the self-justificatory book. Stephens declined

¹³ Kit Denton, *The Breaker* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1973), 237.

¹⁴ Kenneth Ross, *Breaker Morant: a Play in Two Acts* (Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1979), 61.

¹⁵ *Scapegoats*, 83-84. "Rule 303" is a reference to the calibre of rifle that was issued to the Bushveldt Carbineers.

¹⁶ Witton to A G Stephens, 15 June 1905, Fryer Library, UQFL 2, 2/2695c.



to publish it¹⁷ in its current form but (for a fee of 10 guineas) was prepared to edit it and endeavour to find a publisher.¹⁸ Witton apparently accepted this offer, for Stephens forwarded the manuscript to London. Almost a full year later Stephens received his agent's advice that:

*there is not Buckley's chance for such a book. S[outh] Africa is as dead as a door nail – the only thing that people know about it here is that the war was not worth the fighting and a book about an individual's troubles in it not worth the writing at this stage. Certainly Witton could get it published – if he pays for it.*¹⁹

The attempt through Stephens having failed, Witton requested the return of his manuscript "to have it brought out here in Melbourne by private enterprise".²⁰ In June 1907 the book was published by the Melbourne printing firm of D. W. Paterson, almost certainly at Witton's expense.

A strand of the mythology of Witton, Morant, and Handcock as imperial victims is the persistent story that Witton's book was suppressed and burned by the authorities. As recently as 2003, Nick Bleszynski claimed that the book's release:

proved as controversial as its contents ... only a handful of first edition copies ever saw the light of day, as the publisher's

17 The *Bulletin's* own publishing programme focussed on verse and fiction. Jennifer Alison, "Case Study: *The Bulletin* as Publisher" in Martyn Lyons & John Arnold, *A History of the Book in Australia 1891-1945: A National Culture in a Colonised Market* (St Lucia: University of Qld Press, 2001), 57.

18 Witton to Stephens, 30 July 1905, Mitchell Library, Sydney, Papers of A G Stephens, A2303, ML MSS 4937/3 CY3461.

19 W H Chater to A G Stephens, 26 July 1906, Fryer Library, UQFL 2, 2/585.

20 Witton to Stephens, 1 September 1906, Fryer Library, UQFL 2, 2/2695k.

warehouse mysteriously caught fire. It was rumoured those that survived were bought up and destroyed by the British Government to avoid the truth coming out.²¹

Another writer also focuses on the rarity of surviving copies:

*It is thought that Witton's seven advances [i.e. advance copies sent to the author] held today in major public libraries or in the hands of the author's relatives, are the only ones that survive.*²²

Such stories are the stuff of conspiracy theorists. Aside from the fact that Witton's version of the story was hardly "controversial", it is clear that support for his campaign for release had been widespread even among influential Australians. He counted amongst his supporters Alfred Deakin, who was at the time Prime Minister of Australia and Sir Isaac Isaacs who had, the year before, been Deakin's Attorney-General and was now appointed to the High Court. They would hardly give vocal public support to Witton on one hand and yet condone the suppression of his book. Moreover, Witton's own correspondence gives no indication of a fire or any malevolent suppression. On the contrary, he writes to Stephens, "My book is going off very well. D W Paterson informs me that the first 1,000 is now all gone and he has orders for more which is very satisfactory".²³

As to the book's "rarity", there are at least 20 copies of the 1907 edition

21 Nick Bleszynski, *Shoot Straight You Bastards: the truth behind the Killing of 'Breaker' Morant* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 2003), 435.

22 G A Embleton "Afterword" in George Witton, *Scapegoats of the Empire: the True Story of the Bushveldt Carbineers* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1982), 243.

23 Witton to Stephens, 27 August 1907, Mitchell Library, Sydney, Papers of A G Stephens, A2303, ML MSS 4937/3 CY3461.

Top left:

This cartoon, originally published in *The Owl* (Cape Town), 19 August 1904, depicts Witton's release from prison and his meeting with James Logan.

Top right:

This cartoon was originally published in *The Owl* (Cape Town), 11 December 1903. It satirises Witton's incarceration drawing parallels with the case of Alfred Dreyfus, the French military officer wrongly imprisoned for treason in 1894. The mailed fist represents the German Eagle suggesting that pressure from Germany over the murder of Heese the German missionary had influenced the conviction.



Above:
According to cemetery records held by the Brisbane City Council, George Witton's remains are interred in the grave of his wife, Mary, at Lutwyche Cemetery on Brisbane's northside. The cemetery is adjacent to Kitchener Road, doubtless named after the man who signed the death warrant for Morant and Handcock and who sentenced Witton to life in prison.

available in repositories across the country. The Hayes collection of the Fryer Library alone holds three copies. Doubtless there are further copies in private collections. Any "rarity" the book may have today seems more consistent with a comparatively small print run than it does with any Machiavellian intervention by government book burners.

Witton's book may have achieved "satisfactory" if modest sales, but it had few literary supporters. Dismissed by one contemporary as "mostly a garbled and untrue version of the facts,"²⁴ Stephens' agent in London had been sadly pessimistic: "I honestly do not think the outlay of your money is justified in so hopeless a book."²⁵ James F Thomas, who had loaned his trial notes to the author, described the book as only a "surface transcription" of them.²⁶

Witton focussed *Scapegoats of the Empire* on his own exoneration, relying on the Nuremberg defence – "I was just following orders". It is equivocal at best about Morant's and Handcock's roles in the killings, and was so preoccupied with the "injustice" of Witton's own case that it eclipsed early attempts to rehabilitate the reputations of Morant and Handcock²⁷. However, if the book did not itself champion their reputations, it greatly assisted those that did. In 1962 the seemingly dormant Morant story was revitalised by journalist Frank Cutlack. *Breaker Morant: A Horseman Who Made History*,²⁸ drew so heavily on *Scapegoats* that Cutlack is said to have suggested giving half of his royalties to Witton's copyright-holders.²⁹ *Scapegoats* also lent a good deal to the screenplay of Bruce Beresford's film, the most culturally influential of all the recent retellings of the story.

With the book finally published, Witton moved from Victoria to the Burnett district of Queensland in 1908 and settled into pineapple and dairy farming. In 1913 he married Mary Louisa Humphrey, his neighbour's sister, at a ceremony in

Maryborough.³⁰ Unlike James F Thomas whose life fell into disarray in the wake of the Morant affair,³¹ Witton was not a recluse but was, it seems, popular and well integrated into this small community. He is remembered there with fondness as an engaging story-teller and a keen card player.³² Other residents remember him as "of military bearing, very erect, softly spoken and a gentleman at all times."³³ Witton Road in the district is named after him.

George and Mary had no children, and in March 1931 Mary died from stomach cancer. In 1940 Witton sold up and returned to Victoria. Two years later he suffered a heart attack while cranking his car.³⁴ He was taken to Guildford Private Hospital but died on 14 August 1942 at the age of 68. Members of the Gayndah, Biggenden and Coalstoun Lakes communities organised the erection of a memorial plaque to Witton and other Boer war veterans from the district. The plaque is located at the Coalstoun Lakes and District Soldiers Memorial Hall. Its unveiling in February 2002 marked the 100th anniversary of Morant's and Handcock's executions.³⁵ Morant's and Handcock's shared grave is in Pretoria cemetery and was tended there for many years by Witton's sister. The cross over the pair's remains has been replaced recently by the Department of Veteran's Affairs who have taken responsibility for the grave's upkeep.³⁶ The plaque at Coalstoun Lakes remains the only monument to Witton whose ashes are interred in the grave of his wife, Mary, at Lutwyche Cemetery in Brisbane although his name does not appear on the headstone. Ironically, the street adjoining the cemetery is "Kitchener Road", doubtless named after the man who signed the death warrant for Witton's mates and was "pleased to commute his sentence to penal servitude for life".

24 De Bertodano cited in Davey, *Breaker Morant*, 53.

25 Chater to Stephens, 26 July 1906.

26 Cited in Craig Wilcox, "Killer's Tale Murdered the Truth", *Australian Literary Review*, 5 September 2007, 24.

27 Davey, *Breaker Morant*, 166.

28 F M Cutlack, *Breaker Morant: A Horseman Who Made History, with a Selection of his Bush Ballads* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1962), ix.

29 Wilcox, "Killer's Tale Murdered the Truth", 24.

30 Jessie Wein, *George R Witton: an Australian Gentleman* ([Biggenden: Wein, 199?]), 26.

31 Anthony Hoy, "Tenterfield Battler", *The Bulletin*, 4 April 2000, 34-36.

32 Information provided by Don and Mary Randall, Biggenden, October 2007.

33 Wein, *George R Witton*, 27.

34 Embleton, "Afterword", 244.

35 *Maryborough Chronicle*, 23 February 2002, 17.

36 Craig Wilcox, "Ned Kelly in Khaki", *Australian Magazine*, 23 February 2002, 20.

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