

Taking Miles Franklin to the Voortrekkers: Memoir

Shirley Walker

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In the 1970s and '80s Australian scholars began a serious movement to take their literature to the wider world, an attempt to convince the metropolitan cultures that exciting writing was happening, not just in the centre, but at the periphery as well. We early enthusiasts for the dissemination of Australian Literature were certainly evangelists, but we were serious critics as well, and the interchange which took place at a series of international conferences was at a seriously professional level.

I was part of this movement, one which took us to many an unfamiliar and sometimes exotic place. With the help of ASAL (the Association for the Study of Australian Literature) and the Australian Foreign Affairs Department, our overseas literary colleagues visited Australia and some of the consequent friendships have lasted for over forty years.

Following a conference at Oviedo, Spain, in the early 'nineties I was invited by Professor Suárez Lafuente to present a course on Australian Women Writers there. We used the internet for the submission and marking of essays and I visited the students several times. Thirty post-graduate students completed this course over the next six years and I like to think that many of them are now teaching, and perhaps teaching Australian Literature, in Spanish universities.

Meanwhile we walked in the high mountains of the Picos de Europa where bears still roam, and visited the shrine at Covadonga where the Visigoths, under Pelayo, defeated the Moors for the first time on the Iberian Peninsula. Cultural exchanges are, obviously, not just about great books. I knew this for sure when I heard a beautiful young Spanish student – all but one were female – comment that my husband looked 'just like Bryan Brown'!

The relevance to this volume – in honour of Professor Bruce Bennett – is that Bruce was at the forefront of this literary diaspora. He was a familiar presence at overseas conferences and hosted a number of overseas colleagues at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) in Canberra. He too would have had many interesting memories of this period.

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Not all my memories, however, are as rosy as those of Oviedo; memories of a lecture tour to South Africa in 1984 still disturb me.

My invitation to give a series of lectures on Australian literature in several South African universities preceded the sanctions concerning apartheid. As I was unaware of the true state of affairs in that country, I saw no reason to decline. By the time I left South Africa I had well and truly changed my mind.

I had a personal motive for the journey: I had a small granddaughter in South Africa; I had not yet seen her. As well, I had always known that my Grandfather's younger brother, a dashing young Irishman, had fought in the Boer War. He was obviously a tear-away, having previously absconded from the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Perhaps my uncle had, like Breaker Morant, joined the Bushveldt Carbineers. I hoped to find out more in Pretoria, where the Boer War records are kept.

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I took lectures on three Australian writers - Breaker Morant, Banjo Paterson and Miles Franklin - to the South African students. The writing skills of the three, obviously disproportionate, were not at issue here; all three were legendary Australian figures who, I thought, would interest the students. As well, both Breaker Morant and Banjo Paterson had been to the Boer War, the latter as a war correspondent, and Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* was set for the South African equivalent of the Higher School Certificate.¹

In retrospect I question whether literature which is so culturally specific is transferable to another, totally different context. Also it's probably a mistake to go anywhere near the Breaker Morant story on any continent, or indeed anywhere in the world. Morant has always been a controversial figure, executed by firing squad for murdering Boer prisoners and seen by many as a victim of the British under Lord Kitchener. He considered himself to have been, in the words of his final poem, 'butchered to make a Dutchman's holiday'.² His status in Australian folklore is equivalent to that of Ned Kelly: larrikin Aussie, on the wrong side of the law, but definitely a victim of the British establishment or its colonial equivalent.

The truth is that Morant had a dubious reputation long before he left Australia. He had lied about his supposedly aristocratic parentage. He presented as the son of a certain Sir Digby Morant but was actually the son of the Master and Matron of the Union Workhouse at Bridgewater in Somerset. Morant had also married and then deserted another well-known and controversial Australian, Daisy Bates. Known as Kabbarli, she was later famous for her work among the Aborigines on the Nullarbor Plains. Despite his raunchy reputation - for his skill as a horse breaker, his rough-riding in country shows and his cavalier attitude towards women - Morant's poems, published in *The Bulletin* and signed 'The Breaker', were extremely popular.

My lecture examined the way that the legend of the victimised Morant had been built up during the course of no fewer than seven literary treatments, (there have been more since) as well as a successful play - Kenneth Ross's *Breaker Morant* - and the even more successful Bruce Beresford film of the same name. Australian historians, playwrights and filmmakers just can't leave The Breaker alone.

The point is that, whether following secret orders from Kitchener or not, Morant certainly did kill a number of Boers who were, in good faith, coming into the camp of the Bushveldt Carbineers to surrender. As well, in jail in Pretoria, he confessed to having murdered a German missionary.³ Meanwhile there was undoubtedly some sort of cover-up by Kitchener. The cabled report of the courts martial which Kitchener sent

to the Australian Parliament contains so many factual errors that it suggests either gross inefficiency or a deliberate distortion of the truth.

It's doubtful whether historians will ever agree on the facts of the Morant case. What is important is the way in which the story has been manipulated to form the familiar anti-authoritarian Aussie myth. Morant's excuse for the brutal, face-to-face murder of Boer prisoners – *I was only following orders* – is the Nuremburg defence; it shouldn't be accepted in any civilised society. That's why I'm appalled when various factions in Australia mount a campaign to have Breaker Morant either pardoned or re-tried, or when *Reveille*, the veterans' magazine in Australia, allows an undertaker to advertise under the banner: *Give your veteran the funeral The Breaker deserved*. There was, however, one important historical consequence. Because of the Breaker Morant affair, Australian troops were never again, either in the first or the second world wars, sent into battle under the direct command of British generals.

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It seems that The Breaker was not the only Australian to show his true colours in South Africa. Using his *War Despatches* as evidence, I found it easy to make a case for Banjo Paterson, Australia's most popular bush poet, as both racist and politically naïve. Despite his abiding image in Australia as the overwhelmingly fair Australian bushman, Paterson was, sadly, just a man of his times. For instance he consistently referred to the African natives as 'niggers', and gave some stringent advice as to how the 'kaffirs' should be treated:

The Boer knows how to treat the Kaffir. When the Kaffir gets quarrelsome or insubordinate . . . the Boer ties him to a wagon wheel and gives him a real good hiding with a sjambok – a very severe whip made of hippopotamus hide. This quietens the recipient in a marvellous way . . .⁴

Paterson was also politically naïve. He failed to appreciate that, by joining the British in their blood-thirsty campaign against the Boers, the Australians were destroying a people who were little different from their own compatriots: small farmers struggling in an often harsh environment.

Olive Shreiner certainly appreciated this distinction and said so. Her remarks, quoted by Paterson in his *Despatches*, appalled him:

You Australians . . . I cannot understand it at all, why you come here light-heartedly to shoot down other colonists of whom you know nothing – it is terrible. . . . You Australians do not understand. This is a capitalists' war! They want to get control of the Rand and the mines.⁵

Paterson just didn't, or couldn't, make the connection

The students at the University of the Witwatersrand listened attentively and studiously took notes, yet seemed curiously unmoved by either controversy. Perhaps they had no conception of the standing, as idealised Australian bushman and poet, that Paterson enjoyed at home, and the absolute disjunction between this and his racial and political comments in the *Despatches*.

Perhaps they also wondered what the fuss was about with The Breaker. What was an Australian doing fighting in their country anyway? Perhaps the myths of victimisation so prevalent in Australia – think of Ned Kelly, Moondyne Joe, Thunderbolt – don't transplant well to another, completely different culture.

We had one light moment in the residential college when I asked the domestic servants for an ironing board and iron so that my husband could iron his shirts. They were appalled. They had never seen a white woman ironing, let alone a white man. They brought the equipment and the crowd gathered to watch the amusing, to them, sight of *a man ironing his own shirts!*

There was no such levity at the Rand Afrikaner University where I gave my lecture on Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, a seminal Australian novel dealing with the struggles of a young woman, convinced of her calling as a writer, and determined to escape the constrictions of a bush upbringing.⁶ Perhaps I was not at my best that day; I certainly didn't get that point across. The whole concept of female literary aspirations seemed to puzzle the students and there were many questions about the bush. 'Was it like the veldt?' they asked. 'Where were the wild animals, tigers, lions and savage natives?' These would surely be a greater threat than the philistinism that Franklin was writing about.

The university itself turned out to be a strange place indeed, its architecture symbolic of the closed society of South Africa at that time. It was built in a large circle, the buildings all facing inward, a conscious attempt, I was told, to emulate the defensive circling of the wagons of the early Voortrekkers when under attack. By turning their backs to the world, the buildings signified, to me at least, the intransigence of this section of white South Africa, defiantly rejecting international opinion. I found the whole experience – the grim architecture, the puzzlement of the students – to be quite chilling.

However there were some optimistic moments. Just south of Pretoria we visited the Monument to the Voortrekkers and at Paal, in the Western Cape Province, the Monument to the Afrikaner Language. We realised, for the first time, that there had been a proud and heroic (though tragically flawed) culture here, expressed in a language which mingled European and African tongues. At Paal we caught a glimpse of what *could* be, in the post-apartheid South Africa: the absorption of many disparate cultures into one nation. This struggle will obviously be a long and difficult one.

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Meanwhile the evidence of apartheid was all around us. The shopping malls in Johannesburg were for whites only and all those designated as Coloureds, or those from Soweto (including servants in the homes of white families), had to be out of Johannesburg by 6.00p.m. This included a group of literary women who had come into the city to meet me and discuss South African writing, including their own. Clad in their national dress, gracious and dignified, still they were forced to cut short their meeting and scramble for the crowded trains in order to preserve the racial purity of the city after dark.

The living conditions in the countryside were appalling. From the train as we made our way south we were able to see for ourselves the squalid and filthy conditions in which the non-white farm workers were living. Children stood up to their ankles in mud in the yards of their ramshackle humpies to wave to the luxurious train as it passed and there were many stories of the low pay, shocking working conditions and lack of compensation for the farm workers if they were injured at work, as many were. The level of violence as outlined in the daily newspapers was appalling and drugs which were available by prescription only in Australia were sold freely over the counter in South Africa. It was suspected that this was to keep the non-white population apathetic.

The small settlement we visited, at Springs, east of Johannesburg, was a gated community, the high barbed wire fence surrounding it locked at dusk as there had been so much 'trouble with the Blacks', as our hosts put it. And the dogs – each family had several – were trained to attack only non-whites, including the servants, who seemed to be in a state of abject fear. Meanwhile the white housewives, freed from their every household task by maids and gardeners, seemed bored and apathetic in comparison with the dedicated literary women from Soweto. We met our granddaughter, which was a great joy to us, but our overall impression was of a community in stagnation, its white inhabitants, immensely privileged by the conditions of apartheid, yet still its victims.

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One of the benefits of the enterprise – that is spreading the word on Australian Literature – was the chance to travel. In this case we caught the Blue Train from Johannesburg to Cape Town, one of the great train journeys of the world. It was, of course, exclusively for whites, the only non-white South Africans on board were the servants who pandered to our every wish – an uncomfortable experience, given the limited employment options available to these people. Sitting in splendour, sipping champagne, we saw the wonderful scenery of the high veldt and the Drakensberg Mountains through windows sprayed with gold dust so that the glare would not disturb us.

Then, from the top of Table Mountain we saw the Cape – appropriately called the Cape of Good Hope – spread out before us. We thought, first of all, of the early Dutch explorers who had come this way to Australia. Then, more importantly for us, we considered the many migrants, our ancestors, both convicts and free settlers, who had rounded the Cape, and then sailed eastward before the roaring 'forties to a new life in the Great South Land. All of our ancestors, unless we are lucky enough to carry some of the genes of the original Australians, have been boat people.

Above all we thought, standing there on Table Mountain, of the soldiers of the First A.I.F. (the Australian Imperial Force), young men longing for adventure, who had called in at Durban then Cape Town on their way to the butchery of the Somme. The casualties among the Australian soldiers were horrendous. So many passed this way never to return, and those who did return were never the same again.

Meanwhile Australian families treasured their postcards of Zulu warriors in full regalia pulling uniformed members of the A.I.F. in rickshaws; culturally inappropriate but, knowing what was ahead of the Australians, perhaps forgivable.

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This brings me to another memorable fragment, something that happened at an Australian Literature Conference at Berne in Switzerland soon afterwards. An early paper was given by an earnest young academic bent on 'proving' that the Anzacs at Gallipoli and on the Somme were not the heroes depicted in Charles Bean's *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*.⁷ Nothing if not partisan, I rose to my feet, reminding him that any young Australian who hadn't run away from the Somme or swum away from Gallipoli was a hero in anyone's terms.

The speaker wasn't deterred. In fact his future career would be based on the demolition of our country's pride in the achievements, and the losses, of the young men of the A.I.F., the only volunteer army in either of the two major wars of the twentieth century. Did I say that I was partisan? I certainly am.

But there was a sequel. At the conclusion of the session I was approached by the Australian Ambassador to Switzerland who was attending the conference. He reminded me that his Christian name was Pierre, even though he hailed from Tasmania where a French name would have been quite a standout. His mother, he said, had been a French girl. She had seen the soldiers of the first A.I.F. march up into the trenches, and had never forgotten the sight. She swore, for the rest of her life, that they had all been seven feet tall. A memorable moment.

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As for my fact-finding mission in South Africa: my granddaughter now lives in Australia. She is descended on her mother's side from one of the old Voortrekker families who circled their wagons on the high veldt, and rolled out their blankets under the African stars. Now she can observe the evolution of the new South Africa from the safety of Ulladulla in New South Wales.

Regarding the tearaway uncle, that story went west. Since I was a child I had been told of this heroic Irish uncle who had joined the Northern Rivers Lancers and had left for the Boer War, never to return. It was said that a witness had seen him, by then a Lieutenant, shot from his horse in a cavalry charge at Elands River in the Transvaal. The details were precise, and a whole generation had mourned his loss.

Yet his name did not appear on any military roll either in Pretoria when I searched there, or back in Australia.

A search of the Australian births, deaths and marriages records revealed the awful truth. He had not gone to the Boer War but had, in fact, gone to Queensland (in Australia all male absconders go north). He had lived there for another 36 years without marrying or contacting his brother, my grandfather. He is buried in a lonely grave in a Brisbane cemetery.

The lesson: Don't believe everything you're told, especially about horse breakers, bush poets or heroic Irishmen!

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Having retired from the University of New England, **Shirley Walker** is now an Honorary Research Fellow at that institution. Her two most recent publications were *Roundabout at Bangalow: An Intimate Chronicle*. U.Q.P., St Lucia, 2001, and *The Ghost at the Wedding: A True Story*. Penguin, Melbourne, 2009.

Notes

¹ The lectures on Breaker Morant and Banjo Paterson were published as "A Man Never Knows his Luck in South Africa": Some Australian Literary Myths from the Boer War" in *English in Africa*, XII, 2, 1985.

² 'Butchered to Make a Dutch

man's Holiday' (poem) is reprinted in David McNicoll. *The Poetry of Breaker Morant*. Golden Press, Sydney, 1980, p.62.

³ See 'Some Literary Myths of the Boer War', pp. 13-14.

⁴ A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson, *Singer of the Bush*. Ed. R Campbell and R. Harvie. Lansdowne, Sydney, 1983, p. 603

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

⁶ Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1979. First published in 1901.

⁷ Charles Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.