

Why is the south  
african war so often  
forgotten?



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The battle at Elands River in the South African War was expected at the time to be remembered ' On Australia's page forever' and ' for ever and a day'.

Not only is that not the case, but the whole conflict is rather invisible in Australian history. Why is the memory of the South African War relatively obscure in Australia today compared to later conflicts?

Repeatedly referred to as ' the forgotten war', historians, or indeed anyone, who attempts to resurface the memory of one of the most significant battles of Australian History are unfortunately engaging in yet another battle. The forceful overshadowing by ' the Great War' and World War II makes their endeavour not unlike that of David and Goliath; the fruits of the work by scholars are often unnoticed by wider academia. Australia recalls the First and Second World Wars and the participation of thousands of Australians in the service of the British Empire with great emotion and Nationalistic spirit. The fact that Harry " Breaker" Morant, famous for his war crimes and subsequent trial and execution, is more widely recognized than the Australians on the brink of Federation who lost their lives in South Africa is a testament to the very real fading of what was intended to be remembered ' for ever and a day'. Most have heard of it just as they have heard of the English Civil War: The War of the Roses. They know of it, but the indifference and lack of proper understanding they feel for both is sadly in equal measure. Despite the existence of many monuments scattered across the country, the memory of the Australia's entire chapter in the Second Boer War (1899-1902) has not been blessed with the same iconic status as the wars that followed. This essay is not an account of forgetting and remembering, but rather an investigation into why this earlier conflict

involving thousands of Australians has almost completely disappeared from memory. It will address contemporary political, cultural and social factors that contribute to our current amnesia. Drawing on notable historians such as Craig Willcox, overwhelming comparative statistics and the 'dramatized' legacy left by the film *Breaker Morant* that fuels our distorted memory, it will provide cause for the empty space that should be filled with knowledge of the Boer War in the in-built human compartment where history is stored.

The level of significance of the South African War in the minds of Australians has altered substantially since the events took place over a century ago.

Today, Australia's youth receives little education about the entire affair. The general consensus among the Syllabus Committees under the Various State Boards of Studies who establish what should and should not be included in school curriculums deems it too insignificant as a piece of crucial Australian history. It is a preview to Vietnam which is considered best to be left alone.

[1]Additionally, its 'British-ness' is considered a conflict of interest in trying to educate students that belong to such a multicultural nation. Indeed, in the minds of many, the Boer War was a foreign war in which we should have taken no part. At the time, the extensive public interest and heartrending grief seemed to solidify the conflict as a significant event, and yet today it is almost completely forgotten. For many years, its influence on modern military tactics, the role it played in shaping global capitalism, and the foundations it laid toward a deeper theoretical comprehension of imperialism, established the Boer War as a critical piece of history.[2]Recent perspectives have switched these grand notions to focus on the wars that

brought undeniably greater loss for individuals and sectors of Australia's population.

Some would argue that the place of the Boer War in Australia's broader domestic and imperial history is now, and perhaps rightly neglected, as a consequence of military commentators and historian's obsession with statistical yardsticks.[3] This brings us to the first major reason why the Boer War quickly became a distant memory. No sooner had it ended when it was swamped by the Great War. Australia sent 16, 175 soldiers to South African War, 518 of whom were killed.[4] Just over a decade later, approximately 8, 500 Australian's were lost at Gallipoli alone. Compared with the 417, 000 military personnel who fought in the First World War, roughly 330, 000 of which served at the fronts, with a staggering 226, 000 casualties, including 60, 000 deaths.[5] At first glance, it seems logical that the Boer War became so soon and has remained for so long ' forgotten'. Even the Australian War Memorial effectively begins with the latter conflict. " Moments of national humiliation are rarely commemorated or marked in material form, though here there are exceptions of a hortatory kind." [6] A useful summary is provided by Craig Wilcox:

*" Elands River Post was remembered vaguely, from returned soldier's tales... as a place where Australians from most states had fought together and fought well. Commonwealth governments sponsored no official commemoration of the war. There was no South Africa Day after 1902, no national war memorial, and no Australian official history. Without any urging to remember the war, with waning interest among loyalists... Australians*

*shrugged off an event that had seemed so important, so compelling, to them between Black Week and the relief of Mafeking.” [7]*

Moreover, the Australian contingent in South Africa were integrated with the British regiments. They took no extraordinary part in major battles and lost more men to disease than to enemy combat. Undeniably, the relatively small contributions of the Australian troops in the war is in part responsible for its relegation.

The research undertaken by Wilcox in his book entitled *Australia's Boer War: The War in South Africa, 1899-1902* is widely acknowledged as the most significant of any historian to document Australia's involvement in South Africa. With his meticulous citation of an immense range of both primary and secondary sources, the authority of his scholarship matches the mastery of Les Carlyon's *Gallipoli*, who had an infinitely wider audience. He also masterfully concludes the myth of Harry 'Breaker' Morant, whose shadowy story is a sad summary of Australians' knowledge of their country's contribution to the Boer War. Wilcox stated of Bruce Beresford's film that the Australians are "usually identified for us by slouch hats that none had worn in real life"[8]. This was an obstacle Willcox had to face while aiming to chronicle a factual record of events that would provide unencumbered, episodic detail from the front, and simultaneously aid public comprehension of the war's broader implications. Public memory of war is coloured with misrepresentations produced by media and the infamously unfaithful agency of cinema. However, the Boer War was not exempt from this. The popular sitcom *Blackadder*, proves how damaging dramatizations of war can be to any memory of war. In fact, 'the Blackadder effect' perfectly illustrates the

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issue that Bruce Beresford's film brought with it. Michael Gove, Australian education secretary in 2014 stated " People's understanding of the [Great] war had been overlaid by misrepresentations which at worst reflected an unhappy compulsion on the part of some to denigrate virtues such as patriotism, honour and courage." [9]

Originally written for the stage by Kenneth Ross [10], Beresford's conversion of *Breaker Morant* to the big screen heralded a mild resurgence of the period in the public eye. Tugging on his audiences' heartstrings, he presents them with the enthralling sequence of events surrounding the very real court case that occurred in 1901 in Pietersburg. Utilising the setting of a courtroom drama to its full advantage, he was able to evoke widespread outrage regarding the unfair treatment of Lieutenants Morant, Peter Handcock and George Witton, the three Australian officers on trial, accused of murdering captured enemy combatants and a civilian in the Northern Transvaal. Marina Heung concludes " the emotional power of *Breaker Morant* as a film and its persuasiveness as a political statement dependent on its success in telling its story through a framework supplied by melodramatic conventions." [11] Although a critically acclaimed, box office success, the dominant focus of the film is these men resisting the power of their British masters, and makes no attempt to relay any pertinent facts relating to Australia's involvement in the Boer War itself. The use of melodramatic film techniques results in the distortion of many truths [12] which are pivotal to any real understanding of the reality of our place in the Boer War. Beresford is not entirely to blame. Put plainly, the dramatic nature of film as a medium suppresses any urge for people to reach beyond the story laid before them

and so, the actual Boer War still remains a household name to many Australians, with a gaping *contextual* hole not least of which is the very different judicial system that Morant and his associates were subject too. Prior to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1903, there was no official military legislation, only the Australian Constitution Act: a series of referendums drafted by the Australian colonies, passed by British parliament.[13]The film encourages its audience to judge the legalities of the affair, guided by a moral compass. This begs the question: how can one make a proper assessment with vast amounts of missing context? By persuading the masses that Morant and Handcock should have been granted judicial pardons for their crimes indicates the modern theatrical convention that historical portrayals are no longer treated with the same integrity as they once were. The ghost of The Breaker still rides, while the shadow of the Boer War continues to fade.

On the brink of Federation, particular aspects of the second Boer War itself contributed to its slip from memory. Firstly, it cemented a dual national identity, that of Britain and Australia. This alone meant that any recollection of the war would be shrouded by imperialist values that strengthened rather than loosened its ties to British history. Moreover, with no war to date ever having been fought on its own terrain, the Boer War saw the introduction of Australian troops as secondary ones, permanently stamped as subordinate military personnel with lesser abilities *and* responsibilities. Despite a willingness to volunteer, to earn and to refine their skills as soldiers, Australia had never been involved in any great battles that aroused a sense of excitement in the community. With the notable exception of those who lost loved ones close to them which saw local heartache and vocalization,

the nation experienced a completely foreign feeling, one that they could never have anticipated. Death tolls were not spectacular in number, and many more lost ‘embarrassingly’ by disease, with little left to show for their valiant efforts than their left behind remains with no proper burial, often unidentified. The stories brought home carried little insight into the savagery of trench warfare, the widespread use of machine guns and aerial observation like that which was used at the siege of Mefeking, all of which would be employed again in World War I. The greatest ‘gift’ upon soldiers’ return was instead just the story of a murderer who became a ‘martyr’. As Wilcox succinctly explains in a lecture he presented at the South African Military Academy in 1999, “the war had been too minor, too brief, too comfortably distant for most Australians to provide the new federation with any foundation symbols and mythology. Above all, the war had not been a test.”[14]

Secondly, Federation created a new sense of Australian pride and self-confidence; a noble ambition, if remarkably short-sighted. For the motherland would call upon its military family, who the British colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain declared were ‘now cemented by blood’ just over a decade later. “The new Australian federation was felt to have been ratified by participation in the war. And at that moment... something entered Australia’s DNA.”[15]The prophetic Boer War foreshadowed the knocking on Australia’s newly federated doors by Britain, setting the stage for the Great War that would grip the nation from 1914-1918.

Historian and biographer, Jim Davidson, makes a startling but compelling comparison in his essay ‘The Boer War’. He argues that military and sport

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have begun to converge in recent decades, resulting in people “ slipping into regarding war as sport with guns.”[16]This estimation derives from a number of regular traditions Australians partake in such as Anzac Day football matches that are broadcasted live across the nation along with advertisements for army recruitment in the commercial breaks. Many athletic teams and sporting ‘ contingents’ walk the Kokoda Trail, not only to improve fitness but also to draw nationalistic spirit and build morale. Through the union of military and sporting organizations through the notion of ‘ Team Australia’, Davidson’s idea becomes clear. Society is effectively placing war in the same category as sporting endeavours, an attitude with roots as far back as the celebrated departures of the colonial contingents to South Africa and cemented over time because once again, no real war has taken place on Australian soil. Indeed, “ War for us has always been a series of away matches.”[17]

When Australian’s review the events that occurred over the last century, it is little wonder that they can recollect the pocket of time that we were a small society of British colonists prior to becoming a nation of Australian citizens. The minute war that took place at the start of a century that encompasses layers of radical political and social change in addition to two world wars, is a war that lives on only in in the outskirts of the collective Australian memory. Even those who do know the bare minimum of our involvement in South Africa, where tremendous military growth took place and the seeds of our current national identity were sewn, view it as a prelude to the Great War. Fought on a foreign land for reasons that move few today, it was simply an early and insignificant tableau of the long history of warfare that was to

follow. The most tactile remains are what some see as the unfinished business of the Morant affair.

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[1]Craig Wilcox, “ Australia’s South African War 1899-19021,” *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies* 30, no. 1 (2000): 11.

[2]Barbara R. Penny, “ Australia’s Reactions to the Boer War-a Study in Colonial Imperialism,” *Journal of British Studies* 7, no. 1 (1967): 97.

[3]Andrew Porter, “ The South African War and the Historians,” *African Affairs* 99, no. 397 (2000): 635.

[4]Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 57-56. The Colonial Period, 1870–1901

[5]Ibid., 98-99. The Great War, 1914–1918. 98-99.

[6]A. Erll, A. Nünning, and S. Young, *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (De Gruyter, 2010), 65.

[7]Craig Wilcox and Australian War Memorial, *Australia’s Boer War: The War in South Africa, 1899-1902* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2002), 359.

[8]Ibid., 365.

[9]Michael Gove, “ The Teaching of the First World War,” *The Daily Mail* (January 2nd 2014). <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2532923/Michael-Gove-blasts-Blackadder-myths-First-World-War-spread-television-sit-coms-left-wing-academics.html>(Accessed 12 October 2018).

[10]Kenneth Ross, “ Breaker Morant: A Play in Two Acts,” (Athenaeum Theatre, Victoria: Melbourne Theatre Company, 1978).

[11]Marina Heung, “” Breaker Morant” and the Melodramatic Treatment of History,” *Film Criticism* 8, no. 2 (1984): 4.

[12]James L Smith, *Melodrama* , vol. 27 (Taylor & Francis, 2017), Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

[13]The *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act* took effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1901 and was the only presiding legislation until the *Defence Act 1903*.

[14]Wilcox, 10.

[15]J. Schultz and P. Cochrane, *Griffith Review 48: Enduring Legacies* (Text Publishing Company, 2015), 108.

[16]Ibid., 28.

[17]Ibid., 28.