



## Camden Council Library Services – Movie Club

### Breaker Morant (1980)

### Discussion Questions

1. How is Morant's unit different from standard military units? How does this relate to their actions and tactics?
2. Harry 'Breaker' Morant, was actually christened Edwin Henry Murrant. Additionally, little of his life before his time in South Africa is known, and what is known is uncertain. He was indeed a poet and adept at 'breaking' horses, but he was also constantly on the run from debt collectors, and known for elaborating stories about his past (he claimed to be an illegitimate child of an admiral). What impression does the film give of Morant? Do you like him? Why?
3. What are the problems with the trial? Is due process followed? How and why are the proceedings hampered? Although presented as rushed and with an inexperienced lawyer leading the defence, the trial actually took six weeks during a time when military justice was 'exemplary' and most civilian murder trials lasted for three days (Wilcox, 2009, [The trial of 'Breaker' Morant was no injustice—he was guilty](#)). Does the reality of the case change your perception of the court martial as presented in the film?
4. What was the main argument of Major Thomas' speech at the climax of the film? Do you feel that he is morally justified in his views? Are there other cases from real life or cinematic portrayals of soldiers "just following orders"? How can we reconcile the romanticism to the accused in *Breaker Morant* with the stern condemnation of Nazis in [Judgement at Nuremberg](#) (1961) or Colonel Nathan R. Jessup in [A Few Good Men](#) (1992)? The argument of Thomas' closing speech at the trial has an eerily similar ring to Jessup's reproachful rant while on the witness stand. How willing were Morant and Co to participant in all the activities of the unit? Did their positions shift? Why? Were they "just following orders"?
5. How does the film deal with colonialism? How does it deal with patriotism and differentiate between the two? One review criticized the film for not representing the plight of the Boers, stating that it becomes a petty attempt at pom bashing rather than a comment on colonialism (Boehringer, 1981, [Review](#)). Equally, Wilcox recently commented that when talking of a pardon for Morant & co. we must also think about the descendants of the 30 or so South African's (whites/Boers and blacks) who were killed by the Bushveldt Carbineers (Wilcox, 2012, [Pardon me, but Breaker Morant was guilty](#)). And historian Hamish Paterson

added that, if Morant & Co. receives a pardon, Australia should apologise for the atrocities that were committed (Szabo, [South African Historian Against Royal Pardon For 'Breaker' Morant](#)). How does the film represent and deal with South Africans? Would the inclusion of the Boer's plight at the hands of the British have been worthwhile or indeed necessary in the film? Do you think Paterson has a point regarding the apology?

6. There are numerous elements of the story that are not historically correct. For a start, the actual record of the court martial has never been released, so the sequence of the trial is based predominantly on [Scapegoats of the Empire](#) by George Witton, the accused lieutenant who was convicted alongside Morant and Handcock. Another element that is certainly incorrect is the final scene, what some critics consider to be not only the best scene of the film, but one of the greatest of Australian cinema (Buckmaster, 2014, [Breaker Morant: rewatching classic Australian films](#)). Instead of being executed while sitting on chairs on a cliff edge as the sun gently rises with Morant defiantly shouting, "Shoot straight, you bastards. Don't make a mess of it", the actual execution happened on the grounds of the jail in the middle of town (Wilcox, 2009, [The trial of 'Breaker' Morant was no injustice—he was guilty](#)). The historicity of the film is still relevant for many people, with the call for an official pardon for Morant & co. surfacing from time to time (Wilcox, 2009, [Pardon me, but Breaker Morant was guilty](#)). Does it matter that the film is not historically accurate? To what extent is a film obligated to be so? How should we view the film (historical, historical fiction, mythology, fiction)? How does a film contribute to national identity?
7. Some claim that the film is an 'authentic portrait of what happens to men in war' (Simmons, [Breaker Morant: breaking in the Breaker](#), p.45.). In what ways does it display different responses to war by those involved in it? Do the three men on trial respond to war differently and if so, how? To what extent does war "change men's nature", as Major Thomas claims? To what extent is it an anti-war film?
8. Are the men guilty? If so, of what are they guilty? If not, is there an injustice and what should be done?

**Further reading (available in the Library):**

Bleszynski, Nick, [Shoot straight, you bastards!: the truth behind the killing of 'Breaker' Morant](#). Milsons Point, N.S.W.: Random House. 2002.

Wilcox, Craig, [Australia's Boer War: the war in South Africa, 1899-1902](#). South Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press. 2002.

The above two deal with the subject most interestingly. They also take divergent approaches to the subject. Bleszynski is strongly in defence of Morant and Handcock, and was instrumental in the petition to have them pardoned. Wilcox is focused more on the larger involvement of Australia in the Boer War, but devotes considerable attention to the Morant case. Wilcox is convinced of Morant and Handcock's guilt and believes much of the hype surrounding the event (including the film) is mythmaking.

Denton, Kit, [Closed File](#). Adelaide: Rigby. 1983.

Denton is interesting when discussing the legend that surrounds Morant. Denton wrote the 1973 novel *The Breaker*, with many believing, incorrectly, that it was the inspiration for the film (it was actually Kenneth G. Ross' 1978 play *Breaker Morant*). But in the ten years between the novel and the non-fiction *Closed File*, Denton lost faith in the legend, stating so in the book, but the former novel still has greater appeal.

Simmons, Gary, [Breaker Morant: breaking in the Breaker](#). Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Moving Image. 2003.

This is a study guide, going through the technical and narrative qualities of the film, although has little on the historical elements.

[Breaker Morant: the retrial](#). DVD. Directed by Greogory Miller. Kew, Victoria: Umbrella Entertainment. 2014.

This documentary, co-directed by Bleszynski, focuses on the discussion of the 'new evidence' surrounding the case. Part biopic, part historical court case, it features interviews both with those who consider Morant a criminal and a hero.