

Harry 'Breaker' Morant Memorabilia? The J.F. Thomas Collection

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Probably one of the best-known Australian soldiers today, Harry Morant was brought to public attention by the 1980 Bruce Beresford-directed film *Breaker Morant*. The film climaxed with Morant's court-martial along with those of fellow-accused Lieutenants Peter Handcock and George Witton. The proceedings resulted in the execution of Morant and Handcock in Pretoria on 27 February 1902; Witton received life imprisonment, but was released in 1904. It is worthy of note that the Beresford film is quite accurate in its portrayal except for the final execution scene in which the accused are seated on chairs on a grassy field. Morant and Handcock were reported as having been shot standing against a stone wall at the Pretoria prison. His catch-phrase from the film, "Shoot straight, you bastards!" was likely because Harry considered that the firing party would aim off, not wanting to kill him. The last thing he wanted was a botched execution.

As a valuer under the Australian Government's Taxation Incentives to the Arts Scheme, I was contacted in 2017 by a Mr Shane Williams from rural New South Wales. He requested valuation of a collection of items associated with a Major Thomas that included 'Breaker' Morant artefacts. Initially sceptical about their authenticity, Shane delivered them to my home and we had a few weeks to record and further describe the items listed here. I was humbled by the opportunity. To examine these relics from more than a century ago with their relevant history is one of the highlights of my studies.

The Thomas collection was found on a public rubbish dump outside Tenterfield and comprised of about thirty items. Its discovery stimulated a great deal of interest, including in the media.¹ Some items in the collection are described here as groups, e.g. items 6, 8, 17, 18 and 21. Descriptions and valuation involved consultation with other collectors and dealers including Jeremy Tenniswood in the UK, Dr. Robert Cargill, Brian Labudda, Raymond McMahon, and John Carter on the Gold Coast.

Harry Morant: biographical outline

Although his identification tag reads 'Edwin Henry Morant', he was also known as Harry Harbord Morant. Born in Somerset, England in 1864, Morant emigrated to Australia and worked in outback Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia.

An accomplished horseman and bush balladeer, with a reputation as a womaniser and hard-drinker, Morant enlisted with the South Australian Mounted Rifles in early 1900 to serve in the Anglo-Boer war, embarking from Adelaide for South Africa on 27 February 1900. Promoted to sergeant, he was seconded to other commands and war correspondents after which he went back to England for six months. On returning to South Africa, he took a commission as Lieutenant with the Bushveldt Carbineers (BVC) in April 1901.



Figure 1: Harry 'Breaker' Morant, c. 1902 (AWM).

The BVC was based at Pietersburg, but Morant and a detachment went to Fort Edward in the Spelonken district some 145 kilometres north of Pietersburg. Captain Percy Hunt, a personal friend of Morant, was killed in an ill-advised attack on the Viljoen Commando farmhouse in bright moonlight. Bodies of the fallen were later reported to have been mutilated by the native Lobedu warrior allies.

When news of the action and death of his friend reached the Fort, Morant vowed to hunt down all responsible and to kill them. Captain Hunt has previously issued such an order regarding enemy soldiers but Morant was not inclined to obey that command, until news of Hunt's death and the reported mutilated bodies reached him. The Boer commando was pursued but Morant opened fire too soon and the element of surprise was lost. As a result, only one wounded Boer, Floris Visser, was captured and later executed on Morant's orders.

British officer's trousers were found in his possession and Morant thought they had been taken from Hunt. Other members of the Viljoen Commando were later captured and when brought in, Morant ordered them to be shot.

Some men under Morant's command bore grudges for earlier reprimands along with his orders to the unit to reduce cattle theft and looting of stores at Fort Edward. A letter listing six incidents attributed to Morant, Handcock and others was sent to the British commander which resulted in their arrest, court-martial and the ultimate execution by firing squad of Morant and Handcock. An appeal was possible to the Crown but Lord Kitchener was reported to have been 'unavailable'.

In the cases of Morant and Handcock, British law and due process were not adhered to, even though they were guilty of murdering Boer prisoners. However, they maintained throughout that they were under orders to do so.

James Thomas of Tenterfield

Their defence lawyer was Major James F. Thomas from Tenterfield New South Wales, who felt partly responsible for an inadequate defence and their execution on 27 February 1902. He subsequently lobbied officials, newspapers and the government after his return to Australia, for a reconsideration of the events and an exoneration of the convicted men. My short examination, summarised here, did not find any subsequent report or published article on such records.



Figure 2: J.F. Thomas, n.d.
(supplied by Ian Skennerton).

Thomas was a staunch Federationist, friendly with Sir Henry Parkes, 'Banjo' Patterson and other notables of the day. He kept

Morant's personal possessions along with books and records of the new nation, trial accounts and other souvenirs. Previously a well-to-do landowner who also founded the local newspaper, Thomas suffered acute anguish and eventually experienced a mental and physical breakdown. As his circumstances continued to deteriorate, Thomas slept outdoors, bankrupt and penniless, living on vegetables given to him and sleeping on an iron bed frame in the garden at Haddington near Tenterfield. He carried the precious mementoes of his Boer War experiences around in a hessian sack. Thomas eventually died from exposure and malnutrition on 11 November 1942, a tragic end for a proud and patriotic individual.²

After his death, the sack and its contents were moved indoors to an unknown local property where they lay for many years until recently, when they were dumped along with household furniture, kitchenware and rubbish at a local refuse station for ultimate transfer to the Tenterfield tip. By a stroke of good fortune, they were discovered at the tip and removed for preservation – priceless relics of a dark chapter in Australian military history in the Transvaal at the end of the Anglo-Boer war.



Figure 3: J.F. Thomas collection items,
photographed in 2017 (Ian Skennerton).

The J.F. Thomas Collection

1. 1901 Australian Flag, red background with five, six, seven, eight and nine-point stars.

This very rare flag appears to have been a smaller sample rather than full-size, perhaps one of the first, carried to South Africa so that the Australians serving under the different colonial government forces, could see their new national flag. This form of the stars, relative to their brightness in the night sky, was used for a period of little more than one year, reported to have then been changed to seven-point stars at the suggestion of the British Admiralty to facilitate easier manufacture. Nevertheless the prominent Federation or Commonwealth star below the Union Jack retained six points, one for each of the Australian states at the time. It was officially approved by King Edward VII and promulgated in February of 1903.



Figure 4: Australian flag, c. 1901 (reversed), with signatures and annotations (Ian Skennerton).

This flag was signed in black ink by Major J.F. Thomas, Lieut. Henry Morant, Lieut. Peter Handcock and possibly Lieut. G.R. Witton with annotations that included 'Utter scapegoats of the Empire' along with their place of execution 'Pretoria' and the date 27 February 1902. The inscriptions and handwriting have been compared with known examples from other sources and certified by Neil Holland of Scientific Document

Services, P.O. Box 117 Vermont, Vic. 3133, in a forensic examination.

A photograph taken at the Pretoria grave site shows this flag with gerbera flowers on the graves of Morant and Handcock, with Major Thomas standing behind.



Figure 5: J.F. Thomas at Morant's gravesite, Pretoria, c. 1902 (supplied by Ian Skennerton).

2. and 3. Bandolier, Leather, .303, Mounted Infantry, British manufacture, introduced in 1889. Leather with 50 leather cartridge tubes, tabbed flaps, maker 'G & W ALMOND? & M 1892' with 'HM' (Henry Morant) stamped in the leather under the buckle tab. The item is in worn condition with broken sections. From the differently turned flap sequence, this is the very bandolier that 'Breaker' Morant wore in his renowned photograph.

4. Pattern 1888 bayonet scabbard, British contract manufacture, reversed broad arrow stamped in leather back, as sold from British into colonial service. Originally issued with Martini-Metford rifles *per* South Australian and West Australian service, these rifles were turned in after arrival in South Africa when troops were issued with magazine rifles from British stores. The Patt. '88 bayonet was regulation issue with the M.L.M. and M.L.E. rifles. Locket stamped '930' barred out, '8' on opposite side of locket mouth. 'E' contract maker on locket is partly visible underneath the wire staple, and 'H M' is stamped near the locket mouth.

5. Hallmarked silver cigarette case by James Dimon & Sons, Sheffield, 915S, which is stamped 'H.M.' on the underside of the base.

Size: 12 cm length x 7.6 cm width x 2.5 cm height, with scorched deformity in the flat surface, being shallow buckling at the centre of the base. This was most likely from being positioned over an improvised methylated spirit stove for the purpose of heating water, also likely to have occurred later when it was carried around when Thomas was sleeping rough. A 'D' loop is soldered onto the left side of the case as a means of securing it to equipment. We consider that this was likely the case from which Morant took his last cigarette to smoke before execution.

6. Brass flask and cup, 'trench art' made from fired artillery shell cases. Fashioned into a flask with accompanying cup that is seated on top. Size is 10 cm and 5.8 cm wide, 15 cm high for the flask and 8.3 cm high for the cup. The pouring lip is 1.7 cm in diameter, cork wanting. The bottoms of both receptacles are adrift as the solder has melted, probably because it was used for boiling water on an improvised methylated spirit stove by Thomas in his later years. It is reported that Morant was offered a final swig of alcohol before his execution and it is possible that this was the vessel from which he drank it, as all these items have survived together, kept as precious mementoes by Thomas after the execution.



Figure 6: brass flask and cup, belonging to Morant (Ian Skennerton).

7. Identity disc made from a British penny, with the short remains of

a leather neck thong. Damaged at lower edge from obverse side by penetrating .303 projectile. Obverse shows a young Queen Victoria bust, likely 1864 year, being the same as Edwin Henry Morant's date of birth. There is little doubt that this identity disc was worn by Morant at his Pretoria gaol execution and recovered when his related personal effects were handed over to Thomas afterwards.



Figure 7: Morant's identity disc, with damage (Ian Skennerton).

8. .303 British Mk II and Mk V ball rounds with blank cartridge in Anglo-Boer War issue clip. As fired in .303 Magazine Lee-Enfield rifles by the 1st Btn. Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders firing squad at Pretoria jail on 27 February 1902, that we (Brian Labudda and Ian Skennerton) consider to have been Mk V ball 'dum dum' ammunition.

Examination of projectile residue at the entry point, lower edge, results in an *ad hoc* conclusion that the deformation was more likely caused by a hollow point Mk V bullet rather than Mk II ball. The Mk II would result in an intact nickel envelope penetrating the coin, whereas the hollow point Mk V exudes some lead from its core. This is also established by the splayed exit damage to the coin edge where it would have been in position against Morant's chest upon his execution.

A blank cartridge shown was the type reportedly loaded in some rifles of the firing party, so squad members would not know that they had fired the ball round that resulting in the death of the prisoner. The collection also contains a Mk 1 charger clip of the period holds the three different cartridges, display purposes; a Mk II ball with headstamp: 'B C II'; a Mk V ball (dum-dum hollow point), headstamp:

'B C V'; a blank cartridge without headstamp; and a charger clip Mk I, .303 with contract manufacturer stamp (with thanks to Brian Labudda, Kingaroy).



Figure 8: medal and badges belonging to Morant and Thomas (Ian Skennerton).

9. Bushmen's Corps medal, silver washed (officers?) likely worn with his ID disc. Obverse: 1899 British Transvaal War, veiled bust of Queen Victoria 1900. Reverse: 'Good luck to Australian Bushmens Corps 1900' with mounted horseman. Stamped 'H M' (Henry Morant).

10. Sweetheart badge in hallmarked silver. May be Honourable Artillery Company (London). Horseshoe marked 'So. Africa 1900', surrounding Royal Artillery crest with Birmingham hallmark, 1900. Likely gift for lady in England but not given or maybe retrieved before he left England.

11. Heraldic family crest, a rampant lion on ball, holding a stylised tree. This cast brass item was a 19th century horse harness decoration. The base appears to have been soft soldered onto something in the past, likely an attachment for horse harness or possibly used as the stem or handle for a wax seal. It is not certain whether this item belonged to Morant, but more likely to Thomas.

12. Hessian bag, labelled 'FIDELITY FEED, BUNGE / AUST / PTY

WARWICK QLD.' 125 lb net. Rat-eaten at bottom corners and right edge, fragile, although the printing remains legible. This sack contained the selection of Morant and Thomas relics carried around Tenterfield by Thomas after his retirement in much later years.

13. Book; *National Australasian Convention*, Sydney 1891 [1. The Votes and Proceedings of the Convention 2. The Reports of the Debates]. 34 cm x 22 cm, 455 pages, hard bound. 'J. Thomas' written in pencil, top left corner of front inside cover. An original edition dated 1891.

14. Booklet; *Royal Geographical Society of Australia*, Vol. XVIII (part 1) 1900, annotated by Morant's wife at the time, Daisy Bates, in pencil at top right-hand corner of front cover, 'D.W. Bates'. 24.3 cm x 15.1 cm, 24 pages, soft cover with fold-out map of South-East Asia, Australasia and Americas at the back, 1880. Insets of Port Curtis (Qld.) and Santiago, Philippines. It is interesting that Morant kept this personal memento of Daisy. Red ink pen marked with 'x' on Queensland report, ticked next to 'Discussion Thereon'. Some of the text on inside pages is underlined in red ink of the time, effectively highlighted.

15. Single loose page torn from book, 24.3 x 15cm size, Royal Geographical Society and Stamford's African List advertisements. Graphite pencil ticked alongside 'Map of Africa' and another double ticked on 'Map of South Africa'. Likely came from Daisy Bates along with item 14, as Thomas corresponded with her after returning from South Africa.

16. Daily Telegraph, Sydney, Wednesday January 2, 1901 (second edition). Tabloid miniature publication. 26 cm x 22 cm, 24 pages newsprint, stapled landscape format binding, reduced size for overseas transit. Print size is so small that a magnifying glass is required to read the text. This particular copy is certain to have been brought back with Thomas from South Africa. It was discovered, folded lengthwise, in the hessian sack.

17. Sir Henry Parkes newspaper clippings, assorted, four in number. No dates are visible but most likely after the turn of the century. Original pages have been trimmed for content so as to show the articles only.

18. Three books from Thomas collection, *Life of Sir Henry Parkes, Fifty Years in the Making of Australian History* (Parkes), and *Wordsworth's Poetical Works* with Henry Parkes' autograph and 'J. Thomas' inscribed on the inside front covers. These three books are original first editions.

19. Gerbera seeds. Major Thomas brought these back from South Africa in 1902. According to various informants, Thomas is accredited with having introduced the gerbera plants to Australia upon his return in 1902. Now on display at Tenterfield School of Arts Museum, J.F. Thomas collection.

20. PMG [Postmaster General] post bag, another Major Thomas item obtained post-WW2 in Australia. Now on display at Tenterfield School of Arts Museum, J.F. Thomas collection.

21. London News, 36 full sheets, 1 half-sheet, 14 April 1900, J.F. Thomas collection.

Conclusion

The flag (No.1) has had preservation work at the University of Melbourne's Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, and is reportedly now in Melbourne. The cigarette case, penny, and Mk V .303 round (Nos. 5, 7 and 8) were forwarded to James Unkles for showing to federal ministers in a review of the Morant, Handcock and Witton appeal. Updates can be found at the <https://breakermorant.com/> website. Some items described here were previously on display at the Queensland Military Historical Society Inc., at the Legion Club, Church St., Fortitude Valley but I am advised that they were later removed to Tenterfield. Others (nos. 18-21) are now on display at the Tenterfield School of Arts Museum in New South Wales.

Notes

¹ See Greg Growden, *Major Thomas: The bush lawyer who defended Breaker Morant and took on the British Empire* (Melbourne: Affirm Press, 2019), pp. 271-2. For media interest, see for example the ABC News coverage of the discovery: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-27/breaker-morants-possession-may-have-been-found-at-tip/8655516>

² See Growden, *Major Thomas*, James Unkles, *Ready, Aim, Fire* (Melbourne: Sid Harta Publishers, 2019), and James Unkles, 'A country lawyer at war' *LSJ Online* [Law Society Journal], 4 October 2019: <https://lsj.com.au/articles/a-country-lawyer-at-war/>

Charters Towers in the Great War

DOUGLAS POTTER

The goldmining township of Charters Towers, 135 kilometres west of Townsville, is a township steeped in Queensland's military history. Established as a municipality in 1873 following the discovery of gold by prospectors and during a period of intense frontier conflict, it had at that time a population of some 4,000 people. The new and vigorous settlement was named after Gold Commissioner W.S.E.M. Charters, a "big man from the Cape, said to be six foot six inches (1.9 metres) tall and weigh[ing] twenty stone (127 kg), hence the "Towers".¹ By the 1890s Charters Towers had boomed with a population of over 20,000 and was known as "The World" by the local inhabitants, as everything one would want was obtainable there.²

Its volunteer defence corps was formed in 1881 following the German annexation of Northern Papua-New Guinea, which added to the residual fear of Russian attack that had prompted fortifications around the Australian coastline. By 1885 Charters Towers had two companies of volunteers, A and E companies of the Northern Division of the Queensland Defence Force, a Cadet Corps and a Defence Force Band. Later a rifle range was established north-west of the town which was shared by the Militia, Rifle Clubs and Police Force.³ So strong was the military enthusiasm of Charters Towers that it became the headquarters of the Kennedy Regiment in 1888 when it was moved from Townsville, where it had been established in 1886.⁴ In 1914 the Kennedy Regiment was one the first to mobilise at the war's outbreak. It was also the first to send troops from the mainland, initially to Thursday Island and then to Papua New Guinea.⁵

By 1914 Charters Towers was the second largest settlement in Queensland with the population of 4,262 in the township itself and 25,000 in the wider district.⁶ It was a community so proud of its military service and loyalty to the British Empire that (as this paper demonstrates) any dissent or protest against the war struggled to be heard.

In June and July 1914, the local papers the *Northern Miner* and *Evening Standard* reported the looming crisis in Europe, with the news of Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination and the