

FACING Ben Hall

Actor Jon Finch in the role of Ben Hall in the 1975 TV series. Australian Broadcasting Corporation Library Sales.

Of the thousands of criminals who took to the road in mid-19th century Australia, only a very few achieved folk hero status as bushrangers. Among those that did, there was an element of bravado and performance in their actions. Outlaws like Frank Gardiner, Ben Hall and Ned Kelly knew they were famous and sometimes dared authorities to come and get them. Even after death some bushrangers kept on 'performing': in illustrations, cartoons, historical re-enactments, film and television.

The pictorial heritage of Ben Hall is especially rich, beginning with some photographs Hall had made of himself in the early 1860s before he turned criminal. Having one's photograph taken had become relatively cheap by then. A small studio portrait in a hinged, velvet-lined case was not beyond people of quite modest means, wanting to mark their progress towards middle-class success.



Patrick Marony, *Death of Ben Hall*, oil on canvas, National Library of Australia.



Ben Hall, the Bushranger.

Top: An ambrotype portrait of Ben Hall taken in about 1861. Justice & Police Museum collection, Historic Houses Trust, of NSW.

Above: Ben Hall as he appeared in the Melbourne press in May 1865, shortly after his death. pictures collection, State Library of Victoria.

Perhaps the most striking of these portraits of Hall is an ambrotype made in about 1861. The surface of the picture is badly damaged but we can see him sitting calmly and confidently, kitted out in good trousers and jacket, waistcoat, and a fine looking curly-brimmed hat. In a carte-de-visite made at a similar time, our eyes are drawn to an elaborately arranged necktie. He looks every bit the prosperous young cattleman, which he wanted to be but actually was not – quite. He was co-leasing a station near Grenfell, in New South Wales, and with hard work and good luck he would have done reasonably well. But he would never have been rich.

Illustrated papers in the 1860s carried many pictures of Hall and his fellow bushrangers, but these were engravings. The technology to reproduce photographs had not then been developed. Illustrators may never have seen a picture of Ben Hall and they imagined a heavier, more impressive looking man, with a beard and a cabbage tree hat similar to those worn by bushmen of the period.

The news of Hall's death at the hands of the police in May 1865 caused a sensation. Some depictions of it in the papers showed the figures of Hall and the police arranged as if in a stage play. Many years later, an artist named Patrick Marony painted the scene in oils for his *Death of Ben Hall* (1894), and here the figure of the dying man is almost balletic in its pose. The police are reduced to tiny figures in the background. Little is known about Marony, but he painted many bushranging subjects, perhaps attracted by what had become by then a nostalgic interest in the 'roaring days' of the bushrangers.



A scene from the cartoon strip 'Bold Ben Hall'. Image courtesy of Monty Wedd.



Ben Hall as a 'rebel' in a badge produced in the 1970's. National Museum of Australia.

In the National Museum's collection there is a set of lantern slides that reproduce some of the well-known images of bushranging in New South Wales under the title 'Robbery Under Arms' (borrowed from Rolf Boldrewood's famous novel). Included is a slide of Ben Hall, probably copied from a newspaper reproduction of the ambrotype mentioned above. In the days before cinema, lantern slide shows were a popular form of entertainment and, in this case, a way of experiencing popular history.

In the 20th century Ben Hall became whatever people wanted him to be. Many people believed that he (and also Ned Kelly) had been hounded into a life of crime by oppressive authorities. Hall was characterised as a chivalrous friend to the poor and a champion of the interests of the rural working class. Never mind the photographic evidence that Hall himself, as the son of convicts, had been keen to leave that life behind. In the 1970s the ambrotype image was made into a poster by a group known as the Australian Independence Movement, a breakaway group from the Communist Party of Australia. Headed 'The Rebel', the poster reads: 'For just as in the good old days of Turpin and Duval/ The people's friends were outlaws then and so was bold Ben Hall'. A badge, held by the National Museum, uses the same image and the 'Rebel' title and was probably produced by the same group.

The manipulation of the Ben Hall story reached a peak in a television series, *Ben Hall*, co-produced by the ABC and the BBC and first screened in 1975. Here the presentation of Hall's life is often wildly inaccurate. He is seen as a campaigner for land rights and for justice against the tyrannous and vindictive police force. But there are new elements too. The costumes and firearms seem derived from

the American Wild West. We see Hall in a hat that looks like a cross between a cabbage tree hat, a cowboy hat, and the slouch hat made famous by Australian soldiers in the First World War. Plenty of heroes here to choose from.

Sydney cartoonist Monty Wedd was well aware of the Wild West influence on Australian bushranging iconography. In the 1940s he created a fictional Australian bushranger called 'Captain Justice', but in the 1950s there was a flood of American and Wild West comics and Captain Justice had to be transported to America for a brief period. The experience encouraged Wedd to undertake his own research into Australian history. He went on to produce many comic strips and illustrations on Australian historical themes, supported by his own collection of historic objects to copy. In the late 1970s he followed up a successful strip on Ned Kelly with one called 'Bold Ben Hall'. Published in the *Sunday Mirror*, the strips were widely recognised for their accuracy in settings, costumes and firearms. Wedd said that he learned a great deal about 'my country and my fellow Australians' from the experience of interpreting the Australian bushranging story.

In putting together a display on bushranging in central western NSW in the 1860s, as part of its new permanent exhibition currently in development, the National Museum has the opportunity to use objects to evoke a sense of the experiences of people at that time and place. However, we are also conscious of the popular usage of the Ben Hall character over time. Museum displays are not just about the past, but about how the past relates to the present.

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