

1945

Canine 1: Bureaucracy 0

The life and death and after-lives of Horrie the Wog-Dog

Ion “Jack” Idriess (1889-1979) was a phenomenon of Australian literature. Publishing his first book in 1927 at the age of 38, he issued over 50 titles by the time he retired from writing in 1969. This prolific output included elements of travel writing, biography, history, politics and sociology, but his real *métier* was the adventure story or yarn. A great traveller and adventurer, Idriess called upon his experience as a soldier, drover, shearer, rabbitier and miner to tell classic Australian stories with a clarity that enthralled several generations of readers. In doing so he ensured that a number of memorable Australian lives are largely remembered as he told them. These include Harold Lasseter in *Lasseter’s Last Ride* (1931); John Flynn in *Flynn of the Inland* (1932); Sidney Kidman in *The Cattle King* (1936), and indigenous “outlaw” Namarluk in *Namarluk, King of the Wilds* (1941). With only a few exceptions all of Idriess’ books were published by Angus & Robertson (A&R). It was one of the great Australian author-publisher associations, providing both parties with considerable financial reward, as many of Idriess’ titles sold in great numbers and were constantly reprinted. It was also Idriess’ association with A&R that led to his telling the story of another remarkable Australian life, that of Horrie the Wog-Dog.

Horrie’s story first entered the literary sphere in 1943 when A&R received a raw but interesting manuscript containing elements beloved by Australian readers—animals, war, mateship, and a healthy disrespect for authority. The manuscript had been written by J.B. (Jim) Moody, a Private with the Australian Infantry Forces, 2/1 Machine Gun Battalion Signal Platoon. The 85 page typescript recounted Moody’s experience serving in Egypt, Greece, Crete, Syria and Palestine, and in particular the tale of his Platoon’s mascot, a small terrier they named—using the Australian soldiers’ derogatory term for Arabs—Horrie the Wog-Dog.

Horrie was approximately six-months old when he was found by Moody in apparently pitiful condition. Restored to health he remained with Moody’s Platoon in North Africa and the Mediterranean for the next fifteen months. Although many Australian military units adopted animal mascots, they were forbidden from travelling with troops or being returned to Australia. However through a variety of ruses—usually involving Horrie being hidden and transported in a modified backpack—the small dog remained with the Platoon throughout their overseas deployment. During this time he was “promoted” to the rank of corporal (with stripes proudly emblazoned across a small jacket designed to keep him warm), worked as a courier, and suffered injury in a shrapnel blast. Moody also credited

Horrie with saving lives, as his acute hearing making him an ideal sentry able to raise an early warning when enemy aircraft approached.

Moody's Platoon was eventually repatriated to Australia with the advent of the Pacific War, and so began Horrie's longest journey. Once again hidden aboard a troop-ship he eventually made it safely to Australia and was disembarked without detection in April 1942. Moody soon departed once more to continue his service in New Guinea, but not before leaving Horrie in the care of his father in Melbourne, and his manuscript for *Horrie the Wog-Dog* with A&R in Sydney.

Moody's account of Horrie's adventures was written with considerable verve and successfully captured the dog's intelligence and pugnacious spirit that beguiled Moody and his fellow soldiers. It was, however, well short of being ready for publication—it was considerably too short, and lacking in the detail and colour that would lift an engaging animal story into an engrossing war-narrative. When A&R passed the manuscript to Idriess he was the ideal person to prepare it for publication. He was by this time well established as a star of the A&R publishing stable, and he had spent his war years writing instruction manuals for the Australian military (with titles such as *Shoot to Kill* (1942) and *Trapping the Jap* (1943)). In addition Idriess had already enjoyed great success with his own war memoir, *The Desert Column* (1932). Part of Idriess's colourful life story included serving in Gallipoli and Palestine with the Australian Light Horse, and *The Desert Column* is based on diaries kept during his war time experience. The book is a classic of Australian military history, particularly renowned for its account of the actions of the Light Horse at Beersheba, often credited with being the last great cavalry charge. Idriess was not a participant in the charge at Beersheba, but provided a first-hand description apparently obtained from a nearby hilltop. It has since been disputed as to whether Idriess did indeed see the charge take place, but his record of the event nonetheless has an economy and immediacy that is typical of his best writing. *The Desert Column* also includes a brief account of another Australian animal hero, in the form of Simpson and his Donkey on Gallipoli. This episode also appears to have been a later interpolation by Idriess into his diary, as it appears unlikely that he would have been aware of Simpson (or his donkey) during the short time the two men were together at Gallipoli.

For much of the period that Idriess revised the manuscript of *Horrie the Wog Dog* for publication Moody remained overseas on active service. The two men were, however, able to correspond. This principally consisted of Idriess putting a series of questions to Moody with a view to having him expand on matters that had been glossed over in the original writing of the story. As a result Idriess was able to develop and extend Moody's manuscript in several important ways. Perhaps the most telling was the introduction of members of Moody's Platoon into the story, and the development of the character of the Platoon itself,

referred to in the published book as “The Rebels” because of their disdain for military authority. As Idriess writes, “Always one, and usually two or three were in trouble, through no fault of our own.” Moody’s original manuscript had not referred to the platoon as The Rebels at all, but the usage allows Idriess to include a series of tales that invoke the personalities of Moody’s mates while tapping into the mythology of irreverent Australian diggers and battlefield mateship that he knew from experience. In this way terms such as “mates” and “cobbers” (both absent from the manuscript) become key, and Horrie himself emerges a member of a close-knit band of comrades-in-arms. Involving fellow soldiers in the story also lends itself to the extensive use of direct speech, an element almost entirely absent in Moody’s manuscript, but one that aided greatly in bringing to life the story of Horrie and his “mates.”

One result of Idriess’ elaborations to Moody’s text was to create some ambiguity regarding the authentic “voice” behind the first-person narrative. For while the book is proclaimed on the spine and title page to be by Ion L. Idriess, the latter also notes that it is, “Written from the Diary of J.B. Moody, Private VX13091, A.I.F.” On the opening page Idriess, “introduces you to me, J.B. Moody of the 6th Division, A.I.F., training in Europe for whatever the future might hold.” However readers familiar with Idriess’ previous books would have found the laconic, confident and concise storytelling to be utterly characteristic of the author, and to a considerable extent the personalities of Idriess and Moody conflate in the telling (and reading) of the story.

Another important feature of the published book was the inclusion of seventeen photos of Horrie capturing his war-time adventures. Moody—who worked as a photographer for some time after leaving the army—was responsible for taking the photographs under conditions that would have been clearly difficult for carrying cameras and storing film. The photographs became, however, a crucial element of the book and may have been integral to A&R’s decision to persevere with Moody’s manuscript. They captured Horrie’s intelligent and engaging expression as well as some of his escapades, and these photographs were later to become an essential part of the dog’s media presence and wider public appeal.

By early 1945 *Horrie the Wog-Dog* was ready for publication. Moody, by now discharged and back in Australia, travelled from Melbourne to Sydney with Horrie in order to introduce Idriess to the subject of his book. Although bringing Idriess and Horrie together was only intended to create some pre-publication publicity, it had unforeseen and disastrous consequences when on the following day (February 13th) reports of the meeting appeared in both the Sydney and Melbourne press. These articles, complete with a picture of Idriess and Horrie engaged in a hand-to-paw shake, described how the dog had been “smuggled” into Australia, and immediately brought Horrie to the attention of quarantine officials. Their response was swift and decisive. Despite Horrie having been in Australia

some three years Moody was ordered to surrender the dog. He apparently mobilized support for Horrie, as A&R wrote to the Director of Veterinary Hygiene pleading Horrie's case and enclosing a copy of the galley-proofs of the soon to be published book. When a reply came it expressed "surprise ... that your firm would countenance a publication which records a deliberate breach of the law," and reported that Horrie had already been destroyed.

Press coverage of Horrie's demise was widespread and universally condemned the government action. Headlines such as "Legal Murder of War Dog: Executed by Red Tape", and "Horrie the Wog Dog Was Officially Murdered", expressed a public mood that overwhelmingly sided with the innocent "war dog" (frequently described as a "hero") against the uncaring bureaucracy. Nor did the press defer to public sensitivity, with the *Truth* describing how Horrie "had his brains blown out by order of the Commonwealth Quarantine authorities." Public meetings were held (several featuring Moody condemning the Government's calumny), petitions signed, questions asked in Parliament, letters written, death-threats made. As the furor peaked attempts were made to involve the Prime Minister and to have relevant bureaucrats charged with offences of animal cruelty. Part of the quarantine authorities' defence was to note that in the months of March and April 1942 numerous "animal mascots" had been seized from ships carrying returning soldiers, including "21 dogs, 17 monkeys, 1 cat, 1 rabbit, 1 parrot, 1 pigeon, 1 goose, 1 duck, 3 squirrels and 1 mongoose." Horrie, it seemed, had been sacrificed in order to make a point to other returning soldiers.

It was in the midst of this public uproar that *Horrie the Wog-Dog* was finally published. The book proper concluded with Moody safely returned to Australia once more and Horrie secure in the care of his father, but Idriess noted the hero's sad fate in a simple postscript:

EPITAPH

Well, Horrie, little fellow, your reward was death. You who deserved a nation's plaudits, sleep in peace. Among Australia's war heroes, we shall remember you.

Under Quarantine Regulations, Horrie was destroyed on 12 March 1945.

Later the same year Horrie's story went international when a US edition of the book appeared under the title *Dog of the Desert*. The revised title was not so much an early manifestation of political-correctness, but rather a consideration for American readers unfamiliar with Australian slang. Similar alterations were made elsewhere, so that "larrikin" became "hoodlum", and references to "cobbers" deleted. The most significant deletion in the US edition, however, was—as it turned out—the prescient decision to omit the concluding epitaph and thereby restore a happy-ending. As far as American readers were concerned, Horrie lived!

The epitaph did prove to be accurate in its prediction that Horrie would be remembered. For although the outrage inevitably subsided, reminders of Horrie and his fate occasionally surfaced in the press and found the story being retold. Such occasions included the release in late 1945 of plans for a memorial to Horrie in Sydney's Hyde Park (it was never built); the appearance on Anzac Day for many years of a wreath for Horrie at the Hyde Park cenotaph; Moody donating the dog's jacket and carry bag to the Australian War Memorial in 1966; and Moody's death in 1979. On these occasions, or when the press was simply looking to fill Anzac Day newspapers, Horrie's heroism, loyalty and unfortunate fate were revisited, and the bureaucracy again taken to task for their heartless part in his unnecessary demise.

There the story might eventually have rested, had not author Anthony Hill received some startling information in 2002 that was to completely rewrite the sad conclusion that had become such a part of Horrie's legend. Hill learnt that Moody had deployed a ruse more common in Australian horse-racing—the "ring in"—to save his beloved dog. In the days it took for Horrie to be surrendered to authorities Moody scoured dog pounds until he acquired (at a cost of five shillings) a dog that sufficiently resembled the "wog-dog." While Horrie was whisked away to safety in rural Victoria—where he is said to have lived out a full and happy life—the "five bob dog" was surrendered and destroyed in his place. Horrie's true fate was thereafter a closely kept secret, not revealed for nearly six decades, well after Moody's own death. It is unclear if Idriess was aware of the switch, or if he too believed that Horrie had been sent to an early grave.

Inspired by the story of Horrie's narrow escape, Hill set about collecting other stories of animals that had played a part in Australian military history. The resulting book, *Animal Heroes* (2005) featured the full story of Horrie and the five bob dog for the first time. *Animal Heroes* not only reignited interest in Horrie's story but in animals-at-war generally. In 2009 the Australian War Memorial curated a travelling exhibition (that continues to tour throughout 2011) under the title *A is for Animals*. Aimed at a younger audience the exhibition features items from the Memorial's collection including Horrie's coat and travel-pack.

Horrie's story resonated yet again during 2011 when a remarkably similar story, with a very different ending, surfaced in the national press. Australian soldiers serving in Afghanistan rescued AJ, a young mutilated dog and set about repatriating him to Australia. This time operating with government approval a public appeal was conducted to raise the money necessary to see AJ through quarantine and have him transported to Australia. The fund raising effort was substantially over-subscribed, and after quarantine in Dubai and Sydney AJ reached Australian shores in late 2011.

And such is the contemporary interest in Horrie that he now lives on in cyber-space. He has his own Facebook page, and the National Archives of Australia has made available a digital version of File V213; “Wog-Dog”. In addition the Archive has packaged a selection of these documents for secondary school children under the title “*Wog Dog*”—*Vector or Victim*. It asks young readers to assess the documents and consider the dilemma facing quarantine authorities in 1945 as they decided Horrie’s fate. In this way, over sixty years after the event, a small, once-stray Egyptian dog still serves as a litmus test by which Australians assess the importance and meaning of mateship and gauge their tolerance for bureaucratic authority.

Further reading

Eley, Beverley. *Ion Idriess*. Sydney: Imprint, 1995. Hill, Anthony. *Animal Heroes*. Camberwell: Penguin, 2005. National Archives of Australia. ‘*Wog-Dog*’—*Vector or Victim*. <http://www.naa.gov.au/Images/horrie_tcm16-36799.pdf>. Idriess, Ion. *Horrie the Wog-Dog: With the A.I.F. in Egypt, Greece, Crete and Palestine*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1945.

Paul Genoni