The Myth of the "Sacred Brumby"

by Col Gibson, June 2015

"It is spurious to suggest that the brumbies are having any permanent or serious environmental impacts on catchments when compared to landslides, bushfires and floods". Horses have existed here for over 160 years, but it's only the last decade or so that they've suddenly become an issue. It's clear their numbers have risen in recent years since the 2003 fires that killed around half the population, but you could probably point to management issues in the national parks for that. The brumbies are sacred as they, and the management of them, are the last link to our heritage that we treasure and we will never allow them to be culled inhumanely. Meanwhile, the horsemen that have traditionally managed the animals there suddenly no longer have access to what they consider ancestral territory. It's fine for the bushwalkers to enjoy their wilderness experience alone and to themselves, but they should not resent our relationship with the mountains and our heritage that goes with it."

Leisa Caldwell, Snowy Mountain Horseriders Association. In *Wild.com.au* 6-1-2015

"Love it or hate it, wild horses are a part of the Kosciuzsko environment. The brumbies are a quintessential Australian symbol; they have earned their place as part of the iconic bush heritage in this region and must be protected. I will continue to work with stakeholders who recognise the heritage connection that the brumbies bring to the region, I will work closely with brumbie advocates in exploring wild horse management techniques that find a balance between the environment and recognising that brumbies are part of the Kosciuszko landscape. There are few places in the world where wild horses can roam free."

– John Barilaro, Member for Monaro, 20-12-2014.

It is a great modern paradox that many of the descendants of the men who so ruthlessly slaughtered the wild horse, or brumby, in the 19th century now claim the horse to be an iconic symbol of national heritage, opposing culling and removal and asserting that our national parks are the rightful home of "the sacred brumby". To the squatters and stockmen of the 19th century, and indeed well into the 20th, there was no such thing. Cattlemen universally considered them a pest and any form of "traditional management" that may be ascribed to them can only be expressed in terms of a determination to exterminate them.

There was no romance about wild horses at all until the likes of Banjo Paterson dressed it up; yet even Banjo was harking back to the days, not so much when the brumby roamed free, but when thousands were there to be shot and skinned for a few shillings a hide, and the thrill unsentimental characters like the Man from Snowy River got from killing them. Farmers and graziers hated them because they over ran good land and competed with stock. Today they don't wreck good grazing land; they just wreck national parks, which is not the graziers' problem, nor that of the brumby advocates. Traditionally, the brumby has been a problem only when it impacts economically, not environmentally.

The brumby horse is not a breed; it is a broad term for any wild horse in Australia. It is not a 'Waler' (the station bred work horse of the bush, which itself, being a combination of breeds, is regarded as a 'type', not a breed. So called 'Waler brumbies', running wild in the high country (*Snowy Times: Snowy Mountains Summer Visitors Guide*, 2009/2010, p. 10), soon lose, through further interbreeding, the identity of Waler in all but the most general of senses. Associating the brumby with the Waler is more an advertising ploy to promote tourism in the Snowy Mountains, which is enhanced by the Walers' reputation as a courageous cavalry mount in various wars, particularly World War I, thereby connecting the brumby with the patriotism of the Anzac legend, another great marketing tool.

The first misnomer about the brumby that should be despatched is the origin of its name. There ought to be no confusion about this, and the supposition that the name might be derived from a Captain Brumby of Hawkesbury, who, in 1804, is said to have let his horses go wild when he moved to Van Diemen's Land, should be dispensed with. There is no tradition of use of this name in the Cumberland or Hawkesbury districts, despite references to wild horses there as late as 1878 (e.g. *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* 2-11-1878). The earliest use of the name "brumby" in print seems to have been in *The Australasian*, of Melbourne, in 1880. If the term originated in 1804, it is hard to understand why it took over 70 years for it to find its way into print as a synonym for the term "wild horses", which had been in general use all that time. In the complete absence of any link between the Hawkesbury in 1804 and Melbourne in 1880, the very suggestion the wild horses were named after Captain Brumby is without foundation. Most of the other theories proposed have even less substance to them, so I will spare the reader those and go straight to the most obvious derivation of the word.

The term "brumby" means a horse of inferior quality, as the stockmen considered them to be; it is derived from a word in common usage at the time, "brummy", the definition of which means shoddy or cheap. The brumby was simply considered an inferior animal, try the following: "The wild horses are a great nuisance in some parts of New South Wales, and we really can suggest no means for their destruction… such as to allow of their being driven into some confined space by the united action of several settlers and their men, when they might be starved into a manageable state, or the stallions and worthless mares shot down." (*The Australasian* 16-11-1867); "As a rule the wild horses or "brumbies", as they are called, are not worth the trouble of catching, and when caught are usually weedy worthless, brutes… generally they are worthless, very difficult to break in, and bring a very low price." (*The Richmond River Herald and Northern River Advertiser 2*2-11-1889).

The quality of the brumby mobs varied, but the belief prevailed that many were inbred and useless for stock work: "The wild horses are never much use. They buck like demons, they are straight-shouldered and badly ribbed up, and they never have any courage in captivity" (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 12-9-1891); "Wild horses in Australia are commonly known as brumbies, which it is a common practise to shoot for their hides, and chiefly to get rid of them as not being worth the grass they eat" (*The Land* 15-9-1911); "the place was overrun with wild horses… where they had increased into considerable numbers. So much so that they became a pest and horse-hunting was quite necessary to keep them in check. The horses were very weedy specimens, under-sized, and were shot for their hides." (*The Sydney*

Morning Herald 11-2-1914); "in Queensland the "brumbies" (wild horses) are literally not worth the catching, as at auction sales they only realise a few shillings." (*Northern Territory Times and Gazette* 20-9-1919). It was, perhaps, most simply put in the following brief statement: ""brumbies", as a rule, being worth little more than their hide." (*The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser* 3-8-1900). Substituting the word "brummies" for "brumbies" makes little difference to what is implied.

Not only were they "worthless brutes", the squatters believed they threatened their bottom line: "These wild horses… are becoming a perfect scourge… the squatters lose many stock horses and brood mares by joining the mobs of wild animals…" (*Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers* 27-9-1867); "The great mischief caused to pastoral properties by the "mobs" of wild horses which continually infest large tracts of the less accessible portions of the country, has caused much annoyance and loss to the proprietors of the runs which have been subject to these incursions, and numerous attempts have been made to rid the country of these pests." (*Australian Town and Country Journal* 6-3-1875); "In some parts they constitute a perfect scourge to the squatter, not only decoying his breeding stock, but consuming his grass and water." (*Illustrated Australian News* 26-1-1876); "When grass and water gives out in the ranges and scrub they come down to the tanks and dams, and necessarily deprive the station stock of the amount of feed they consume. Added to this, they are a terrible nuisance to the squatter and to those who travel through the districts… Once let a horse get away with a mob of wild ones, then you may say good-bye to him, once and for aye. " (*The Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser* 22-11-1889); "The term "with the brumbies" is a common one throughout bush Australia to signify hopelessly lost. Portions of western New South Wales and southern Queensland were some years ago almost devastated by brumbies; and all sorts of devices were resorted to by squatters to rid themselves of the pests." (*Evening News* 8-2-1896 extract from *Chambers' Journal*).

The pastoralists' interests were paramount, and if they did not notice so much the damage the wild horses did to the natural environment, since the 1860's they attested in no uncertain terms as to the damage done to the pastoral: "These wild horses are regarded by most pastoralists as an unmitigated nuisance, for they not only decoy away the station horses, but when they exist in large numbers eat the very pick of the pasture over the greater portion of the run." (*Clarence and Richmond Examiner* 7-4-1896); "the getting rid of such a curse as wild horses amongst the cattle has been a great boon to the squatters. A horse eats as much grass as a bullock, and is of no value whatever" (*The Sydney Stock and Station Journal* 17-11-1896); "At no distant period of Australian pastoral history the Brumbie was as great a scourge to the western pastoralist as the rabbit has since become; but a scourge, fortunately, that could be dealt with more easily, and by perseverance, abolished... It is at all times a difficult matter to recover stray stock from the Brumbie mobs." (*Bowral Free Press and Berrima District Intelligencer* 20-10-1897 extract from *Chambers' Journal*); "The baneful influence upon blood horses of the brumbies which are so rife in the country districts was complained of at a meeting today of the delegates to the Chamber of Agricultural Societies. The Secretary, Mr. Bain, stated that the Charters Towers Society, had written complaining of the great harm to their stock in that district through the country being overrun with brumby stallions." (*The Land* 8-6-1923); "The majority of the brumbies were "weeds"… The

brumbies ate the best grass, enticed working horses away, and made the cattle wild." (*The Brisbane Courier* 15-5-1924).

To heroes like those portrayed in Banjo Paterson's classic poem "The Man From Snowy River", there was no love lost when it came to running down and killing the brumby. Though only worth a few shillings for their hair and hides, it was money nonetheless, and wholesale slaughter could turn a good profit. Tens of thousands were killed**.** Horses were often chased down to the point of exhaustion and channelled into trap-yards, or "crushes", by brush or calico wings stretching for up to two miles through the bush. The ensuing slaughter was not for the squeamish, "Once in, their cause is hopeless. The stallions and useless animals are shot, and the rest broken in and sold in the mob." (*The Richmond River Herald and Northern River Advertiser* 22-11-1889); "they were driven into this long lane, at the end of which stood an expert, armed with a keen knife. As each animal passed, its jugular vein was severed, and the bleeding creature tore madly away into its native scrub, only to stagger and die from loss of blood within half a mile of the trap. This devise, though barbarous, did away with the difficulty of removing carcasses, and became the universal method of destruction." (*Evening News* 8-2-1896); "The sire has discovered his favourite is missing and he dashes across the lead. They stop; wild whinnying follows. He gallops back to his poor old mate; her yearling follows. They stand by her in her agony; shot perhaps in some by no means vital part. The mob returns, whinnying and stupid, running this way and that. The Winchester is going all the time. Other mares fall, then colts and fillies drop dead. One by one they die, until at last the old sire is alone among his dead and dying followers. The keen-eyed destroyer sights along the shining barrel again, and the grand old fellow drops, shot through the heart. Mooney rising now finishes the old mare, and the revolting carnage is over." (*Evening News* 8-2-1896).

The brutality was unexceptional: "The plan they adopted on getting within range of a mob of wild horses was to shoot an old mare; the others would then circle round, not knowing what was the matter and in the meantime the rifles were going and the horses falling every minute… Very little trouble was taken in skinning the dead horses. The hide was cleared off the forequarters and a harness horse hitched on to the neck of the skin, which was then dragged off the rest of the body." (*Clarence and Richmond Examiner* 7-4-1896); "They ran about in mobs, each headed by a stallion, and in shooting them, the leader, or boss stallion, was always aimed at first, somewhere between the shoulder and the flank. Mares, who looked to the leader for protection, always stopped, and the shooting them was easy." (*The Brisbane Courier* 15-5-1924); "The marksmen were at work picking out when possible the old stallions, and the noise of shots, squealing of wounded horses and the shrill whistling of the others, whinnying of foals, thunder of hooves, the cracking of whips, and yells of the men was deafening, while the dust was almost blinding. But we urged them on down that passage of death till with a final rush, they bounded through the gap and the curtain fell." (*Daily Advertiser* 8-2-1937).

The brumby runner was inured to the brutality, to him it was as much sport as making a shilling: "Thousands of them may be got for the taking… The only course is to shoot them. The sport is exciting, as may be seen from our illustration, where the sportsmen, ensconced behind the low scrub, are represented as bringing down numbers of the surprised and startled

mob." (*Illustrated Australian News* 26-1-1876); "The stock horses love the sport, and become absolutely frantic with excitement when they hear the rush and rustle of feet of a wild mob; but it is terribly severe work on them. The desperate pace, the rough country, and the severe gruellings they get soon tell on all but those of a cast iron constitution. Some old warriors there are who have come safe and sound through numberless runs, and if a man can get one of these, a few good mates, and a flying mob to go after, he has all the ingredients of as fine a day's sport as anyone could wish to take part in." (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 12-9-1891); "Among the cattle men are riders, hardy, alert, wiry, and tireless. They take a joy in wild horse hunting, finding in it plenty of adventure." (*Wodonga and Towong Sentinel* 23-2-1913).

The pastoralists' brumby eradication campaign operated on a massive scale: in Queensland a man and wife team killed 2,000 horses in a twelve month period, with two teams killing over 6,000 in two years (*Clarence and Richmond Examiner* 7-4-1896); at Rawbelle Station in Queensland 3,492 were killed in eighteen months (*The Sydney Stock and Station Journal* 17-11-1896); at Gingkin as many as 1,100 had been captured in a single hunt (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 11-2-1914): while in the heyday of horse slaughter at Oberon, "During the sixties and early seventies two dauntless bushmen, the Green Brothers… engaged extensively in wild-horse running for the profits to be derived from them. As a result of their operations of this nature over 25,000 horsehides were despatched for sale to Messrs. Mort and Co. within a few years… The carcasses of the slaughtered beats were boiled down in large cauldrons and fed to pigs." (*Sydney Mail* 27-5-1914).

With such carnage it is not surprising that by the early 20th century the wild horse was becoming a rarity in much of southern Australia, where old trap-yards stood for decades as reminders of the hunt: "But when the land was taken up and fenced by the settler they were all caught. The poor old grey being left by himself, quite white with old age and broken down in every leg from hard galloping, but could not be induced to face a yard… He was afterwards shot by some person unknown." (*Wellington Times* 2-6-1904); "How changed is now the scene! Not one lineal descendent of those untamed and unclaimed creatures now treads the hills and valleys of the district, which in these days is thickly settled by settlers deriving their living from the soil by the more prosaic but less hazardous occupation of tilling the soil or depasturing stock in securely-fenced enclosures." (*Sydney Mail* 27-5-1914); "The gradual extension of settlement and of fencing, but more especially the increased rise in the price of all horseflesh, have in the main been responsible for the breaking up of all these wild mobs. Thousands have been shot in the past out of regard for the grass which they consumed being more valuable for other stock than for these animals." (*The Sydney Wool and Stock Journal* 7-5-1915); "All over Southern Queensland, excellent advertisement of the hardiness of local timbers, may still be seen some timbered wings, sometimes extending miles into the ranges. These wings converged to the trap-yard… At daylight all the poor-looking brumbies were shot for their hides, and the better ones driven into stockyards to be broken in at leisure. Those were the "roaring days" when veterans of the "pigskin" made as much as 60 in one night from the sale of hides and trade of horses – and lost it all at poker the very next!" (*Evening News* 27-1-1927).

The peak period of brumby running in south-eastern Australia ran from about the 1860's through to the 1880's, but at some stage every wild horse on every run was captured,

destroyed or disposed of in some way. Once the pastoralists had fenced their runs they didn't have to worry so much about horses on the other side, particularly in hard to follow country in the wilder mountain regions, where they were left to breed. The nostalgia began only when the brumby had been eradicated from everywhere it conflicted with the economic interests of the pastoralists, when it no longer ate his grass or interfered with his stock horses.

Today, while some see them as noble symbols of pioneering forbears, and the spirit of freedom (as exemplified in Elyne Mitchell's fantasy *The Silver Brumby* stories from 1958 onwards), the stockmen who hunted and killed them had no sympathy for the horses: "the back-country settler, or those back-of-beyond bush dwellers, who have had dealings with the subjugation and extermination of the wild horse are devoid of all sentiment in connection with the creature which they hunted down for the purpose of gain." (*The Sydney Wool and Stock Journal* 7-5-1915). Whatever heritage value the brumby may have today lies in the thrill and adventure a certain type of person once got from killing them, and the satisfaction for the man on the land of seeing them eradicated. To say that any place is the brumbies' rightful home flies in the face of the determination of the pastoralists to annihilate them.

Some brumbies were broken in as stock horses, not so much because of their quality, but largely for the fact that they were cheap and available. Wild mobs that were known to contain good quality stock animals more or less recently lost from the paddocks were more likely to be considered a better class of animal, but by and large it was only the few that were picked out for breaking in, the rest being shot or sent to the saleyards (a euphemism for the knackery), but it seems that only when the wild horses were no longer perceived an economic threat from the pastoralists' perspective were they more inclined to be looked at in terms of any positive or useful attributes.

Banjo Paterson romanticised the Man from Snowy River, but sensitively omitted to finish the story with the less savoury details of what the stockmen did to the mob of brumbies rounded up. To Banjo the brumby was basically a prop in the mountain setting that made the heroism of his riders possible. In the minds of many today the brumbies are identified with the adventurousness of that ride, but the Man from Snowy River wasn't riding a brumby, which were considered inferior to stock and station bred horses, nor did the event take place in the Snowy Mountains high country. It's possible that Banjo had heard the story as a young boy, of a famous brumby run in the hills near Yass, which took place in the year he was born, 1864, when a prized colt got away from Gininderra Station, the property of Mr. C. Palmer, to run with the wild bush horses for two years; the story of which was reported in *The Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser* 30-1-1928, perhaps by the last survivor of that ride, a Mr. H. Preece. Clancy of the Overflow types came from far and wide (Clancy being an historical figure from the Murrumbidgee Overflow country), till "After a couple of days hard riding in rocky fastnesses the colt was yarded at Waroo", and the legend lived on.

In Banjo's iconic poem, first published in *The Bulletin* 26-4-1890, he dignified the brumby run under the cover of a noble attempt to retrieve a wealthy squatter's valuable colt. Thus he made an opportunity of lionising the horsemanship of the brumby runner. The story climaxes with the capture, not the killing, of the brumbies, and in this sense is not so much a story of

brumbies, but of the men who hunted them. Poems that reflect on the fate of the horses are not so idealised, and are largely forgotten. It is unlikely Banjo himself, though an avid horseman ever participated in a brumby run; rather, with his great ear for a good story his epic poem is a distillation of the local legends that circulated around the stations and camps at a time when horsemanship was a fine mark of a man. He wasn't the only poet, though, to depict the brumby run in verse, as others sometimes did more honestly, if less glamorously, especially if they'd had their own hands bloodied by the experience, as recounted in the following poem:

The Old Stockman's Lament

Oh, we used to hunt the brumbies on this station long ago!
When the forests were all waving green, and shepherds all the go;
There were no wire fences then; no "ringbark" contracts let,
And a man could travel unrestrained from sunrise to sunset.

Sometimes we'd strive to yard a mob – which was no easy matter.
For once we got them going, they'd start to "break" and scatter;
If we got them to the "coachers," held in some convenient spot,
We'd rush them in with furious haste, but we'd never get the lot.

Sometimes we'd shoot the brumbies (hair was one and six a pound),
When one was shot, and wounded, fell, the rest would circle round;
Loth to leave a comrade thus, confused and in dismay,
And so we'd get some more of them before they'd break away.

But the time came when wire fences hemmed the brumbies in,
And dead, "rung" trees exposed them – then did the end begin:
We soon reduced their numbers, escape in vain they'd seek,
And the last of all the brumbies was the mob at Stony Creek.

We hunted these, and shot them down, till there remained but two.
An old grey mare and a big black colt, them we proclaimed "taboo";
And so the grey mare roamed at will, and the colt stayed by her side,
And no one interfered with them – we looked on them with pride.

But a new boss to the station came, one day 'bout Xmas time,
And when he heard of our "taboo," said, "he didn't care a dime";

He called to Jim, and said to him, “those brumbies I will get,”
(Poor Jim was just dumbfounded – he’s scarce recovered yet).

The day was hot as hades, as they rode up Stony Creek,
And as they searched the hills, Jim said, “I saw them here last week.”
He pleaded for their lives once more, but the boss would not give way,
“I’m going to have those brumbies, Jim, no matter what you say.”

The old grey mare was sleeping – by her side the colt slept too,
Unconscious of the danger that threatened them anew;
A gully deep, quite nearby, opened into Stony Creek,
“You hold my horse,” said the boss to Jim; “up that gully I will sneak.”

A shot rang out, and then Jim saw the old grey mare drop dead.
Another two, and the black colt fell, shot clean through the head;
And when he had fulfilled his task, in a manner so dashed plenr’ry,
The boss came from the gully, with his new “Martini-Henry.”

Sometimes when all is calm at night, Jim hears the brumbies still,
The muffled roar of a galloping mob coming down the hill;
A stallion leads at breakneck pace, see how with sweat they reek,
A grey mare next, Jim murmurs, “that’s the mob from Stony Creek.”

Anon
(*The Scone Advocate* 15-9-1922)