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WALTZING MATILDA … AND THE BAND PLAYED IT

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Abstract: *The essay introduces Andrew Barton Paterson, author of the popular Australian song, considered by many as a "traditional" Australian folk song, "Waltzing Matilda." It draws s parallel between Paterson and Robert Burns claiming that both succeeded in moving between their own poetic work and folk poetry, which helped them to write songs that have taken on a life of their own.*

Key words: *Australian folk music, folk song, Waltzing Matilda*

In 1895, one of Australia's sons, a youngish man of 31 brought up in the bush by a family whose attempts to become owners of land were doomed, like many others, to failure, and with an "erudite and refined" (Fahey & Seal, 2001, p. 2) grandmother in the city of Sydney with whom he spent his school years, gave his country a song that was going to become the country's unofficial national anthem. At the time, nobody would have thought of it of being even that: on January 1, 1901, just days before Queen Victoria died, the new governor general had uttered the slogan, "One people, one flag, one destiny" before "an enthusiastic assembly of 60,000" (Fahey & Seal, 2001, p. 1). It was already incorrect on two points, and nine months later the Australian flag was born.

The differences were on many levels: in 1895, the same year that "Waltzing Matilda" was composed by "Banjo" Paterson, the women of South Australia not only received the right to vote but also to run for parliament; Australia's economic depression was in the wake of a gold rush; Australia was, if not classless, then built upon "rolled-up shirtsleeves [and] hard yakka" (Fahey & Seal, 2001, p. 1).

By the time thirty-one year-old Andrew Barton Paterson produced "Waltzing Matilda," he was already a product both of the bush and the city, and it is in this construct that we should see the text of the song. His wise granny was both urban and urbane, but she, too, had lived her "pioneering days in the bush" (Fahey & Seal, 2001, p. 2). She was, moreover, a great storyteller, and so he got a full helping of firsthand oral history.

Paterson was successful in his profession as a solicitor. For him, writing was a hobby. "Matilda" was not his first publication of 1895: first came his book of poetry, "The Man of Snowy River and other Verses," which not only brought the mysterious "Banjo" acclaim, but created "a particular view of the bush"(Fahey & Seal, 2001, p. 4). This implies that already Australia had an urban public whose mindset was sufficiently far from the bush to allow for a fond, nostalgic view. In fact, according to Fahey and Seal (2001), Australians' "feeling for the bush ceased to be nostalgia and became mythical" (Fahey & Seal, 2001, p. 3) – this in a remarkably short period.

Can we draw any parallels between the literary activities of Banjo Paterson and other non-anonymous authors of what the great collector of English and Scottish ballads, F. J. Child (2001), called "popular"? One individual certainly comes to mind very quickly – the Scottish poet Robert Burns:

> Few poets have moved as easily between the worlds of rural folk poetry and urban literary circles [. . .]. Like many early folk song collectors, [. . .] felt free to adapt and "improve" traditional songs' texts and melodies. He is credited with preserving more than 300 Scottish songs, often setting his own lyrics or traditional lyrics to new or revised tunes. (The American Folklife Center)

Paterson also moved with facility between his own poetic works and the bush songs. His *Old Bush Songs* was published in 1905, but his text, "Waltzing Matilda," was itself set to an old Scottish tune, "Bonny Wood of Craigielea." In this we see a continuum from the eighteenth-century street ballad world which the convicts left behind them and to some extent reconstructed, or had reconstructed for them, as new ballads were written by hack poets for quick sale on the streets of the cities where many of them had committed their felonies.

Just as there is an Anglo-American, or as Renwick (2001) preferred to put it Anglo/American folksong tradition, so Australian songs have grown out of British traditions. England has its Derby Ram and Herring songs of bountiful animals: Australia has the *Wonderful Crocodile*, a strange and thoroughly hybrid creature somewhere between Jonah's whale and the aforementioned archetypal, gigantic bountiful animals:

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The Wonderful Crocodile

Come all you blokes and listen to me
And tell you the truth I'm bound
What happened to me while going to sea
And the wonders that I found
Shipwrecked I was off
And cast upon the ocean
Well I resolved that very day
That country to explore
Fol the rol, the riddle oh the ray-day
Fol the riddle oh the ray-day

Well not far I hadn't ventured out
Alongside the ocean
When I saw a sight that for all I thought
Was all the world in motion
And steering up alongside
I saw 'twas a crocodile
And from his nose to the tip of his tail
He measured five hundred miles

This crocodile I could plainly see
Was not of the common race
And I was obliged to climb a jolly high tree
To look him in the face
And when he opened up his jaws,
Well perhaps you'll think it a lie
His nose it reached up to the moon
And his tail down to the sky

While up aloft this tree so high
A wind blew from the south
I let go and away did fly
Bang into that crocodile's mouth
And as he got his jaws on me
Well, he thought he'd got the victim
But I popped down his throat you see
And that's the way I tricked him

I travelled on for a mile or more
Until I reached his jaws
And found rum kegs not a few
And a thousand bullocks in store
I was alive all care away I threw
For in rum I wasn't stinted
I stayed inside this crocodile six years
Very well contented.

This crocodile was getting old
And alas one day he died
He was six months in getting cold
He was so thick and wide
His skin was ten miles thick, I'm sure
Or somewhere thereabout
I was three months or more
In hacking my way out

Well, now I'm safe on shore once more
Resolved no more to roam
I hitched a berth on a passing ship
And now I'm safe at home
And if my story you should doubt
Well, if you ever go down the Nile
Know very well you'll find the tail
Of this wonderful crocodile (Fahey, 2004)

Naturally, because of the crocodile's position in the food chain being somewhat different from that of a ram or a herring, the boasting motif is more prominent: even so, its Jonah-like passenger is kept happily alive in rum and beef for six years. Australia, like America, has songs of longing (see "10,000 Miles Away" and "Leaving of Liverpool"), which trace back to the beginning of the two countries' own white folklore, for their sentiments are those of the displaced. "The Pommy's Lament" already shows the cheerful contempt of the Ozzie for his northern hemisphere forebear, whereas "The Old Man Kangaroo" depicts the superstitious belief by early settlers that Kangaroos "ate human flesh [and] grew to eight feet tall and would box any man to the ground" (Fahey, 2004, p. 17). "Goorianawa" already borrows from the Aborigine for its title. Amazingly, "The Maids of Australia," which Fahey (2004) describes as "one of the few erotic songs in our folk song catalogue and the first song to deal with the sexual dalliance of settlers and indigenous Australians" was recorded from the English singer Harry Cox in 1953, showing the free movement of the folk canon in both directions.

But what *is* a folk song? For initiated scholars, this is an old chestnut and one most prefer to avoid. Yet the question gains more relevancy, and maybe even more meaning, when applied to the "settler" song of Australia, New Zealand, the Afrikaans song of South Africa, and even to the somewhat older colonial songs of various languages in parts of America. For the ethnographer (which I am not) and other scholars doing business with song (which I hope I am) these countries offer unique opportunities to trace the movement of song, new material coming from changed circumstances emanating from a new fate, a new environment, new communities with self-fashioned norms. English language Australian song is not an entirely new genre, as its roots go back to the ballads and songs of the British Isles: but its re-creations are specific and the majority of its canon, in folksong terms, "recent."

This quality of recentness is not exclusive to the "new" countries: England's industrial revolution engendered a massive impetus of new songs with a young flavour, some just as anonymous as the oldest ballads, while to other compositions we can easily and accurately give provenance of authorship. Songs have to be composed by someone, and even the pioneer of English industrial song collection A. L. Lloyd "was ready to concede [. . .] that the songs sung by miners might have been 'painfully evolved by the colliers themselves' *or* may have been 'written by slick gentlemen who never wielded a pick'" (Harker, 1985, p. 244). The same Bert Lloyd had briefly worked on an Australian sheep station as a young man, and exploited this time when he became artistic director of the prestigious Topic recording label, his first LP, in 1956, being *Australian Bush Songs*. "According to [the Australian John] Meredith, Lloyd made statements which could 'only have

come from a <Stranger> to Australia'" (Harker, 1985, p. 245). Lloyd, although he had worked in the outback, collected from published sources.

Tommy Armstrong (1848-1919), the Northern English "pitman's poet," was a miner working the coalfields of Durham. With fourteen children to support, he needed to tap (literally!) his song-writing talent to keep himself in beer.

Neither Robert Burns, nor Tommy Armstrong, nor the unknown songwriters of the mine whose works were collected by Lloyd, or indeed Lloyd himself, entirely fit the image of Banjo Paterson. He started life in the bush; his father was not a swagman but an unsuccessful landowner who eventually became a land manager; education took him to the city, and by all accounts he was indeed a "slick gentleman" by the time he published "Waltzing Matilda." At about the same time, when he started collecting bush songs, small books (about the size of the "Virág" series in Hungary) called songsters, typically containing song texts but no tunes and popular since the mid-nineteenth century in the goldfields and cities (Fahey & Seal, 2001, p. 5), were beginning to enter the oral tradition. It is possibly not surprising then that in an environment where the bush was becoming a myth, a song composed by the pseudonymous Banjo (self-named after a favourite childhood horse) should take on "traditional" status.

"Waltzing Matilda" is by no means the only comparatively recent Australian song to have achieved traditional status. One such other is the song "Kookaburra," written by the schoolteacher and Girl Guides movement member Marion Sinclair in 1932. The song was entered into a competition in 1934 and performed publicly for the first time in the same year at the Victoria State jamboree, which happened to be attended by the founders of the boy scout and girl guide movement, the Baden-Powells. When Sinclair died in 1988 the publishing rights were held by Larrikin Music, owned by Warren Fahey. In 2009 the Australian pop-rock band Men At Work were successfully sued by Larrikin (by that time Fahey had sold the company) for plagiarising the "Kookaburra Song." Part of the unsuccessful defence by Sony, the band's recording company, was that the song belonged to the Girl Guides Association. Although this was not true, it was, however, popularly believed to be so due to its having become one of the traditional and most popular songs in the movement's repertoire – probably because it can be (and usually is) sung as a round. At the time of the lawsuit, in a media release, it was stated that "Fahey wants the copyright owners, Larrikin Music, to "gift" the song to Australia, arguing that most Australians believe they already have public domain ownership" (Australian Folklore Unit).

The children of Australia definitely believed they had ownership to the popular round. They had already followed roundly in the footsteps of tradition, and started to carve their own version of the song:

Kookaburra sits on electric wire,
jumping up and down with his pants on fire.
Laugh, Kookaburra, laugh, Kookaburra.
Hot your pants must be.

I conclude with another song, which began life in a competition. "(And) the Band Played Waltzing Matilda" was written by the Scottish-born Australian Eric Bogle (b. 1944). His Wikipedia entry dubs him a folk singer-songwriter ("Eric Bogle"); his official website states, "A particularly annoying, whiney little child, it was prophesied that Eric was either destined to be a politician or a folk singer of protest songs. And so one of these prophesies came to pass ..." ("Bogleography").

This is not a paper wishing to define the meaning of folksong – when someone gets it right they should be conferred a Nobel Prize – but it does address the question of how some songs in a young country have entered different domains via different routes. In the case of Bogle's song, it was almost by accident. He emigrated to Australia in 1969. In 1974 he entered a singer-songwriter's competition in Brisbane. Through a strange quirk "Matilda," which he had written in 1971, was performed as an unplanned second song. The story of its rise to fame in the northern hemisphere unbeknownst to its composer is now familiar to many and well-documented, and the list of recordings by prominent singers over many decades is long. By the beginning of the 21st century it was hailed one of Australia's top thirty songs ever. That does not make it a folk song, of course – few developed countries could boast that one of their folk songs was in the Top 30 – but it does make it one of the most popular, at least in the eyes of the Australasian Performing Right Association (APRA), who obviously base their statistics on sales. Given Australia's longtime unerring support of the USA and the UK in their military activities over the past century, it offers a different perspective on war. However, it should be remembered that this song was also sung in 1988 by newly-elected Vietnam veteran Senator Bob Kerrey, who himself had lost a leg in combat, to his supporters. Listening to other versions (and Youtube provides several), it becomes obvious that it has taken on a life of its own with a variety of modifications of text.

Meanwhile, the iconic Waltzing Matilda remains the unofficial national anthem of Australia, luckily having failed to become the official one and therefore avoiding a diminishing of affection on the part of the people – and probably much desecration by irreverent schoolchildren.

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