

His Masterpiece, Our Haunting: Banjo Paterson's Nation-Making Artefact.

By Christopher Kelen

This paper considers the late Victorian story of a late Victorian artefact, one with great resonance in contemporary Australia: the song which – though not the national anthem – happens to be that with which Australians most closely identify. As with the official anthem, ‘Advance Australia Fair’ (with which I dealt in a paper in *AJVS* Vol. 9) much of what interests the contemporary reader about ‘Waltzing Matilda’, concerns the twentieth century story of the nineteenth century song: how it achieved and retained its canonic status, how it has come and continues to embody the national ethos and pathos. Questions as to whether these songs might or might not represent Australia, officially or unofficially, are undoubtedly twentieth century questions.

As with my treatment of ‘Advance Australia Fair’, my aim here is to focus on a reading of the text in context. For the purposes of this paper, I shall forego some of the close reading of the lyrics developed elsewhere, in favour of historicizing the song, its story and their context. By context in this case I mean that of the song’s original composition and reception; in the Australia of those much less recent nineties. Specifically I wish to concern myself with the relationship between the song’s allegorical investment in the events of the decade leading up to Federation or putative Australian nationhood. While it will be necessary for these purposes to refer to the almost entirely twentieth century scholarship on the song, my aim in this paper is to focus on relevant events and non-events, texts and contexts, of the 1890’s.

The question of provenance

A first twentieth century question needing to be considered is that which has motivated most scholarly and pseudo-scholarly enquiry into the song, this being the question of provenance, both of lyrics and music. ‘Waltzing Matilda’ remains, despite its long history, a text of doubtful origin. The irony of the often folksy scholarship

(especially that of Richard Magoffin, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2001) devoted to the song, is that contention over the provenance of the lyrics and the tune has displaced the mystery which lies in the story that the singing buries.

What should there be to puzzle over – it's just a song after all? But there's been quite a bit of speculation over the years. According to *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*:

'Waltzing Matilda' is probably the most continuously and heatedly debated single item of Australian folklore, there is virtually no aspect of the song's composition, provenance, arrangement and ownership that is not contentious in some way. (361)

Note that meaning doesn't rate a mention in this list, nor does the article go on to discuss the interpretation of the lyrics in any way. However, it is my view that the story of 'Waltzing Matilda' 'scholarship' and its failure to come to terms with the meaning of the song from the point of view of Australian identity and nationhood is instructive for the purposes of just such interpretation. Sublimated in the question of the song's origins looms the larger question, of the origins and orientation of those who sing it.

The song's origins have been much studied; its words and their meaning have gone largely unexamined. Oscar Mendelsohn, in the 'curtain raiser' to his 1966 book, *A Waltz with Matilda: On the trail of a song*, writes:

I could have made this book twice as long without padding, for I have put aside a pile of newspaper and magazine articles on the song that I have collected over the years, some of them quite amusing in their crackpottery. They will make an interesting gift to some public library or institution. (i)

The crackpottery and the folk scholarship are apt accompaniments to these tunes and these lyrics, which defy interpretation when they're not evading it altogether. To cut short a long and ongoing saga, there has been doubt over the authorship of the words and the music since the song's adoption in 1903 for the purposes of promoting Billy Tea.

Key players in the contention over provenance have been, in reverse chronological order: Magoffin, Mendelsohn, A.B. Paterson's biographer, Clement Semmler, Russell Ward, Sydney May (author of the 1944 work *The Story of Waltzing*

Matilda, the first book length study of the subject) and Thomas Wood (an English tourist/musician whose 1934 work *Cobbers* helped to popularize the song).

The ‘official’ story is that A.B. Paterson wrote the words – probably in early 1895 – to fit music composed by Christina Macpherson, his host at Dagworth Station (near Kynuna, in Central Queensland). Backdrop to the composition was the violence of the shearers’ strike/s of the early 1890’s, these events culminating in what Richard Magoffin calls the ‘Battle of Dagworth’, in September of 1894. This is – in outline – the story told in any of Magoffin’s numerous publications on the subject. Other accounts (Semmler, Radic, *Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*) concur thus far. The questions of provenance are really about how original the tune might be, what kinds of influences there might have been, and to what extent the lyrics or the story might have been influenced by or borrowed from anything Paterson had heard spoken or sung. The question of the authority of Paterson’s claim is mainly related to the out-of-*oeuvre* nature of the lyric, and to Paterson’s reluctance, when pressed, to engage with the question of its authorship. The question as to the priority of a particular score is complicated somewhat by the fact that there are two popular versions, commonly referred to as the Queensland (Macpherson’s) and the Cowan (from Marie Cowan’s 1903 song used in the advertisement for ‘Billy Tea’). It’s important to note that it’s this latter – commercialised version – that Australians today generally recognize as the tune to ‘Waltzing Matilda’¹.

Questions may well have been asked in the 1890’s as to A.B. Paterson’s role in the creation of the song; if so these questions only gained momentum with the popularity of the song, assured after the Great War and with the publication of various texts which investigated the song’s origins. In brief, the positions of the key players in the last century’s provenance debate are as follows: Mendelsohn believes A.B. Paterson did not write the song (5-6), Ward thinks it likely that the song has in it echoes of earlier work

¹ Oscar Mendelsohn’s account of the Billy Tea connection is as follows:

About 1906 a Sydney firm of tea merchants called Inglis commenced to give away printed copies of the song as a ‘free’ gift with packets of their ‘Billy’ brand of tea. The words were acknowledged as by A.B. Paterson and the music was designated ‘as arranged by Marie Cowan.’ At the foot appears ‘Price 1/6 nett. Printed and published for the proprietors by Turner and Henderson, Litho., Sydney.’ The accountant of the Inglis firm was named Cowan and Marie Cowan was his wife. (2)

Paterson may have collected as a lad in the eighties,² for Wood the issue was never in question; all the rest defend Paterson from the sniping iconoclasm that things of national significance cannot but be subject to. Clement Semmler's argument is based on the defence of the Banjo's character. Semmler insists that Paterson must have written 'Waltzing Matilda' because 'he was a man of the highest integrity and honesty' who 'would never have allowed a lie to be perpetuated'; but Semmler goes on to present Paterson's actual claim to the authorship of the lyrics as weak and anecdotal and second hand (97).

From the Banjo's own pen

In fact it was A.B. Paterson himself, who, late in life, cast more doubt than anyone on his authorship of the lyrics. A key piece of evidence in the debate is a letter of 16th June, 1939 that Paterson wrote responding to an enquiry as to the origin of the song.

Dear Sir,

² Speculating on the veracity of various claims as to the provenance of the song and the likelihood of getting to the bottom of things, Russell Ward told his audiences (at the ANU and the University of Melbourne) in a 1954 Commonwealth Literary Fund Lecture:

...the note of social protest is basic in the folk ballads as it is in Lawson, Furphy and much other and later Australian literary work, but except in 'Waltzing Matilda' and 'A Bushman's Song', it is conspicuously absent from most of Paterson's published verse. For him all bushmen, as such, are noble and romantic, or at least appealing figures. The villains are city people – unemployed on the Domain, or absentee graziers who live upon the work of bushmen without sharing any of their hardships. When Salt Bush Bill, the bullocky, fights with the squatter's minions for the grass to feed his beasts, the story is told humorously and there is no real bitterness in the quarrel. Yet the jolly swagman's defiance of the squatter and the troopers is just as bitter – in the same off handedly laconic way – as was the defiance of Bold Jack Donahoe or the Wild Colonial Boy.

Ward reckons that there would be nothing odd about this were we to suppose that Paterson based 'Waltzing Matilda' on an old bush ballad that he had picked up along the way. Ward takes seriously some contemporary suggestions that there had been a folk version of 'Waltzing Matilda' current in the outback in 1870's and 1880's:

If there was, Paterson may well have heard it once or twice during his boyhood on the Monaro Tableland and retained it shadowily in his sub-conscious mind. When, as a young man of twenty-six, he heard the tune again, he would have been reminded of the forgotten bush ballad. In writing down the words after a lapse of so many years, he might well have been uncertain how much he remembered and how much he improvised on the spot but, being an honest man, he took no steps to publish the song as his own. (Cited from a carbon copy of the lecture sent by Ward to Mendelsohn, in Mendelsohn's papers, held in the Mitchell Library.)

re your letter about the song 'Waltzing Matilda'.

I wrote it when traveling in Queensland. A Miss Macpherson afterwards Mrs McCall McCowan used to play a tune which she believed was an old Scottish tune but she did not know the name of it. I put words to it.

I am sorry to say that I do not know if it is in any of my books. My wife says it is not.

It may interest your literary circle to know that the tune is played in the Continent of Europe, as it is supposed to be the only existing Australian folk song. I have had enquiries from there as to the origin of the tune but the lady who played it did not know who wrote it.

Yours truly
A B Paterson³

It's my intention to proceed from this and several related pieces of evidence to the conclusion that there is probably a hoax (or you could call it a reverse hoax) behind the authorship of the song. Let me begin by saying then that it's not implausible that Paterson felt some ambivalence over the issue of his authorship of a 'folk' song. How can a folk song be owned or authored in the conventional sense? Cultural capital looms large in the equation. This song was – as far as Paterson was concerned – the only song representing Australia as a folk song on the Continent of Europe, pride in its authorship might be tempered in the knowledge that the fact of authorship might threaten the folk status – and perhaps thus the popularity – of the song. So we see already how sundry ambivalences in the song and the version of authority it attests are matched, and necessarily, by the question of authority in provenance: if the author (A.B. Paterson) is who he is then the song isn't what it is (a folk song). By casting doubt on his own authorship, or better still by allowing others to cast such doubts, the heritage value of the people's artefact is guaranteed. Just as long as it gets a healthy enough start in life.

I'll return to the nuance of this putative perhaps not-quite-a-train-of-thought of the Banjo's in a moment. For now I'd like to consider aspects of gender in the question of the truth in Paterson's account. Paterson tells us 'A Miss Macpherson afterwards Mrs McCall McCowan used to play a tune which she believed was an old Scottish tune but she did not know the name of it'. Now it wouldn't be too great a leap from here to suggest that if there were anything doubtful about the provenance of the lyrics, Paterson was, in this

³ Copy of this letter is held at the State Library of New South Wales, Mitchell Library branch; original in possession of Mr L. Copping, A.C.T., 1970; ML document ML MSS 6000.

letter, deflecting attention from that possibility onto the question of the origin of the tune. The uncertainty on the musical side ('believed', 'did not know') is matched with flat assurance as to the lyrics, delivered by the ultimate authority, the author: 'I put words to it'. As for the Miss Macpherson in the picture, note that she starts out with the indefinite article but ends up being 'the lady who played it': 'The lady who played it did not know who wrote it'. Here we have an uncertain woman – a woman becoming a less definite presence in the text – who doesn't know what she's playing.

I'm not so much interested here in the question of whether Paterson was lying or not, as in the relationships established in this text – as in the song – between men and women and the truths, or otherwise, in which they participate. I think there's a remarkable similarity between the letter and the song in this regard (a similarity which would make me, if anything, wish to award the song's authorship to Paterson). In each case, doubtful women (Matilda, McPherson) are at the centre of a tale made doubtful, by their presence or absence, as the case the may be.

Let's follow the trail a little further into Paterson's letter. Who is the authority on the subject of where the song is to be found? The wife. The poet asks his wife whether a particular work of his has been published in a book or not, that particular work just happening to be his most famous, and, as he acknowledges, in fact the only Australian folk song known on the Continent of Europe. There's not a lot of credibility here.

The publication story, as far as Paterson is concerned, is as follows: although the song was purportedly written in 1895, it wasn't published among Paterson's works until *Saltbush Bill J.P.* in 1917. This circumstance is in itself mysterious and we shall return to it. As far as Paterson's 1939 letter is concerned, it seems curious that twenty-two years after its *first* publication an author should have to ask his wife whether or not his most famous work – a work in which he has just expressed inordinate pride – has been published in a book or not. Back to women and men and truth and certainty or otherwise, it seems that the men are doing the talking but the women are landed with responsibility for doubt and dubious assertion and even straightforward lies. Banjo gets to be self-effacing, careless of his fame, while Mrs Banjo is to blame for his not knowing what's what. In the story of 'Waltzing Matilda', apocrypha and mis-assertion become the province of women.

There is a parallel here with what I would describe as the culpable absence of women in the song. The missing Matilda of this story suffices as metonymy for the violence in the song, which is passed along, continually finding a new victim and furnishing new euphemisms in the process.

To return to the suggestion of a hoax, my claim is simply that it is plausible Paterson made doubtful his own claim to authorship in order to promote the song. He felt – and rightly as it turned out – that the song would do better if associated, but not too definitely, with him, and likewise if there were some mystery associated with its origins. Now I think on the evidence so far presented, accepting this claim involves a fair stretch of the imagination. Or rather it would, were it not for the fact that A.B. Paterson left quite explicit instructions about the manner in which he believed the imagination ought to be stretched. A number of his more famous works laud *bullshitting* as an art.⁴

Of Barcoo Jim and Greenhide Billy

The work to which I would like to draw your attention now is a short story entitled ‘His Masterpiece’, which first appeared in *The Bulletin* of 4th April, 1891. ‘The Masterpiece’ tells the story of Greenhide Billy, ‘a stockman on the Clarence and admittedly the biggest liar in the district’.

Sometimes a youngster would timidly ask Greenhide Billy about the *terra incognita*: ‘What sort of a place is it, Billy? How big are the properties? How many acres had you in the place you were on?’

‘Acres be d---d!’ Billy would scornfully reply; ‘hear him talking about acres! D’ye think we were blanked cockatoo selectors! Out there we reckon country by the hundred miles. You orter say, “How many thousand miles of country?” and then I’d understand you.’

It’s the Northern Territory that’s being discussed here. And so it goes on: the rainfall is measured in yards not inches. Greenhide Billy is a man who has seen ‘bigger droughts, better country, fatter cattle, faster horses and cleverer dogs’ than any other man on the Clarence. The competitive claims tend to the gratuitous: Greenhide Billy ‘had seen blackfellows who could jump at least three inches higher than anyone had ever seen a

⁴ A nice prose example is ‘The Cast Iron Canvasser’ (Davis and Stewart, 96-105).

blackfellow jump, and every bushman has seen or personally known a blackfellow who could jump over six feet’.

The story to be told in this hyperbolic tone and setting – the ‘masterpiece’ of the title – is of Barcoo Jim, a drover who falls asleep by the campfire just before the narrator inadvertently causes a stampede of a thousand head of wild cattle: ‘wretches that’d charge you on sight; they were that handy with their horns they could skewer a mosquito’. The charge is caused by Greenhide Billy throwing a stick from the fire at a possum that had startled him. And the charge is through the brigalow scrub, described in the following terms: ‘saplings about as thick as a man’s arm, and that close together a dog can’t open his mouth to bark in ’em’. The narrator’s heroic herd-saving-ride through the brigalow, is described in the following modest terms: ““And how I wasn’t killed in the scrub, goodness only knows; for a man couldn’t ride in the daylight where I did in the dark””.

The listener in the narrative at this point is moved to comment, ““That was a wonderful bit of ridin’ you done, Billy ... It’s a wonder you wasn’t killed. I suppose your clothes was pretty well tore off your back with the scrub?”” The answer: ““Never touched a twig,” said Billy’.

The narrative contrariness is there throughout; the interlocutor must ask and in asking show his ignorance, that he hasn’t understood how things are in the extreme and inaccessible place of legend. Or, as the narrator tells us: Greenhide Billy’s ‘motto was “No surrender;” he never abated one jot of his statements; if anyone chose to remark on them, he made them warmer and stronger, and absolutely flattened out the intruder’.

This is the tongue in cheek stuff of myth, of epic, of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ‘peak times’(183-4) having *the piss* taken out of them, the Augean stables cleared of their finest product, all in time honoured Rabelaisian manner. In the end of the tale, Barcoo Jimmy is not only unhurt by the thousand head of wild cattle passing over the log under the shelter of which he’d dozed off, the stampeding herd have also failed to wake him at all. It’s at this revelation that the story concludes with the laconic line, ‘Then the men knocked the ashes out of their pipes and went to bed’.

Greenhide Billy's key discursive strategy is hyperbole, Paterson's is litotes. Unbelievable things happened, it was nothing at all. These tropes are either end of the one see-saw. Where Greenhide Billy has to make himself and his exploits larger than life at every turn, Paterson's drive is to make himself – not quite invisible – but rather to arrange things so that he will be caught – or perhaps not quite caught – in a disappearing act. The effect of the understatement, for instance in that letter making his wife responsible, is to leave the reader wondering whether as author he's coming or going.

So much for the comparison between Greenhide Billy's and the story of the song; to continue the comparison with the story in the song, the marvellous thing about 'Waltzing Matilda' is that though the tale is entirely lacking in credibility, it's a story told with a completely straight face. Told that way by millions and over a century.

All in all, I do not think it implausible to consider 'Waltzing Matilda' – the story inside and out – A. B. Paterson's masterpiece, and in just the terms he has described in the story of that title. It's in this sense we may consider the song the greatest hoax ever in Australian letters.

How jolly was our swagman?

If the story lacks credibility as such, then perhaps there's something ironically apt in that. The land of immense and unknowable emptiness yields tales stranger than fiction – and better still, it refuses to yield them. The silence of the unknown, unnamed place is eloquent. Absence is personified in the form of the outcast. The swagman is in fact a breaker of the silence of the bush; he brings language where it can't be understood. He speaks (or sings) to his billy boiling, to his bedroll, to the sheep he's stealing, slaughtering, devouring. He's talking to himself, he's singing. He's domesticating his environs with words, with a tune, he's making everything jolly. Making it all OK, but it's not.

Beckoned into the human circle again, his only words are of defiance presaging a death, his own. It's this death impending that justifies the ironic application – formally Australian we might call it – of the epithet 'jolly'. This swagman is jolly – yes because he's had a free feed of sheep – but more importantly because that happened to be his last

supper. This swagman is jolly as a redhead is Blue. The nation devoted to the cause of progress and empire, to the enlightening of another dark continent, sings of itself – unofficially of course – through the allegory of its anathema. And this makes perfect sense if we understand the text as myth. The swagman is the character whose extinction would prove the advent of progress, of order, of nation in the Australian sense. His is the reign of Saturn, his the generation before the commencement of the law, before the kind of primal curse from which sins might be visited or peace become possible.

We might read Banjo Paterson's rhetoric here as foreshadowing epic self-sacrifice of the futile nation-making variety, such as will be seen at Gallipoli twenty years down the track. Poverty drowns itself that we might all enjoy a prosperous future. Logic, in the conventional sense, is quite unnecessary to the myth, which describes time prior to and enabling the onset of logic. The story's lack of credibility in the novelistic sense is a screen for its more serious allegorical lacks. The swagman – himself a figure of absence – needs to be read as a displacement of Aboriginal presence from the story. There's something to quieten the conscience in this. We're not singing the blacks away when we sing 'Waltzing Matilda', we assume they're already gone. It's *terra nullius* we're singing. Note though that this character, in 'drowning himself' – if we accept that version – is behaving in just the self-expiating manner that settlers observed among 'the last of his tribe'. But the swagman isn't a darkie, he's the white man where the blackfellow was, the white man in walkabout mode, the figure of would have been seen as a doomed regression. When we sing 'Waltzing Matilda' we sing away the dark side of ourselves, the no-hoper, the misery-guts-Henry-Lawson side. We sing away that Caliban, whom we remember from Prospero's view as 'this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine'. In fact, it might be argued, we sing away our conscience of the facts, and especially of those facts entailed in our own presence.

This swagman is a curious figure in Australian folklore. Silent, bar in defiance or out of the community of speech, he is suggestive of the inscrutable terrain through which he passes. He and it both defy the allegorical readings into which they lead us. One can't help feeling just a hint of postmodernity here, of the *Waiting for Godot* kind. Everything in the swagman's landscape demands and refuses to mean. The silence begins in oils and

daguerreotype; the figure has all but vanished by the time the talkies start, but as it turns out, there is a resurgence just at that moment, with the Great Depression.

A figure of modernity, or of the long odds outside? The habitus of the swagman carries a silence suggestive of the *bricoleur*, the *flanneur*, of various prototypical wanderers, quixotic yes and Rabelaisian too, as we've seen in the case of Greenhide Billy. We should remember that swagman is just the flipside of drover, a swagman is a drover down on his luck. Christopher Brennan's wanderer is evoked after the event; and well before we have Ulysses, Gilgamesh. The archetypal silence of the swagman – the figure of the track – provides us with a floating signifier in and of the landscape, but a very male kind of signifier. His progress makes it mean.

The great unwashed Australian Odysseus – an Odysseus of the inland, sarcastically enough – may be read as condensation of the explorer and the Aborigine, and so represents for us the first and last of his tribe, a figure we find in A.D. Hope's 'ultimate men' in his ironic anthem, 'Australia'. The swagman, opposite of progress' image, is the atavistic white man, fated to drift from society. He is the one with whom the vast wilderness of civilisation's outside has taken up. This man is a celebration of our fear. What makes him jolly is the terror of impending death in the loneliest of places.

Note that unnatural death in the wilderness – as elsewhere – is the result of human agency. But how do we come by – and to – this vastness which brings death, against all odds, precisely because it is possessed? As in Odysseus' case, the key to the rights and wrongs of the story, the clues that will lead us to detect crime and expect punishment, are all to do with hospitality, its ethos and its abuse.

How to read the landscape in terms of this ethical investment? The problem is that the condensation of the explorer and the indigene conflates the host and guest positions. A critique of this conflation would draw attention to some of the questions with which Australia remains as concerned today as it was at Federation: Who is welcome in Australia and who is not? Who is on the welcoming committee? By what rights does the nation include and exclude? By what ethical motions does the nation recognise itself or fail to recognise where it has been? Such questions should lead us to ask how jolly is this swagman-in-allegory of ours. Such questions point to the radical ambivalence Australians

sing, in the world-wide mode of self welcoming, when they represent themselves to themselves in this song.

This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine

Acknowledging the darkness, his own or anyone else's, was something at which Henry Lawson was much better than Banjo Paterson. Witness the situation he describes in his story 'The Drover's Wife', first published in 1892 in *While the Billy Boils*:

Only last week a gallows-faced swagman – having satisfied himself that there were no men in the place – threw his swag down on the veranda and demanded tucker. She gave him something to eat; he expressed his intention of staying for the night. It was sundown then, she got a batten from the sofa, loosened the dog, and confronted the stranger, holding the batten in one hand and the dog's collar with the other. 'Now you go!' she said. He looked at her and at the dog, said 'All right, mum,' in a cringing tone, and left. She was a determined looking woman... (in Davis and Stewart, 6)

Our swagman here (note gallows-faced) is more threat than victim (just ask your nearest sheep for confirmation). In fact he is like many of Lawson's characters – and like the drover's wife as well – both threat and victim. Lawson's gritty swagman, no more than a sketch, is a product of his objective conditions, a novelistic character with nothing epic about him. Conflict and its potential are clearly gendered in Lawson's story. The woman can be threatened by the man because she's a woman and he's a man.

Absence is a theme but Lawson's story is the third person account of a female protagonist for whom males are absent or to be made absent. No men around but you can see where they've been – there are the kids. There's the droving down on his luck husband, there's the swagman who imposes on her, there's the snake. One needn't be too much of a Freudian to see that this is a woman pursued by the phallus and haunted by its lack. The maleness is all one – the sundowner hassling her could easily be her own down on his luck husband. Is the husband importuning some other woman in like circumstances elsewhere?

There's nothing jolly about these circumstances which pit all comers – from the dog and the snake up – in a ceaseless and sordid struggle for a basic level of survival. Nor

is Lawson's the only swagman's tale along these lines. Barbara Baynton's 1896 story 'The Chosen Vessel' is far grimmer, ending with the lonely woman's rape and murder. The tone and the generic investments of Baynton's and Lawson's swagmen are as far removed from Paterson's as they could be. Yet Paterson's anonymous wanderer retains the whiff of death. With this observation we recognise that 'Waltzing Matilda' is not so out-of-*oeuvre* for Paterson as it might seem. From 'A Bush Christening' to 'The Geebung Polo Club' and from the 'Cast-Iron Canvasser' to 'The Man from Ironbark' here was an author who was always jollying up the bush to jolly up Australia: a one-man morale machine.

In Baynton and in Lawson's bush something terrible is anticipated at any turn, or it's already happened. It may be forgotten within the frame of the story, but it won't be dismissed; that's what the story's for.

Bush all around – bush with no horizons for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten, native-apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilisation – a shanty on the main road. (in Davis & Stewart, 1)

That's Lawson's setting. What the drover's wife gives, she can ill afford to give – she gives under duress, in the hope that she might protect herself.

But what could there be to give in this landscape? Who could be generous to whom here? Extreme unction for the swagman is in his drowning puddle. The billabong becomes a kind of vessel – chosen or not – from which he, the jinnee, sings. His ghost may terrify or delight those who pass by; it will not be released by them. Radical ambivalence is matched in the reciprocity of relations implied by the song: nor will the ghost release those who hear it.

Lawson's landscape is not devoid of power relations, but there is an absence of privilege, certainly. There are no other-than-alienated characters. It is lack, on the social scale, that places these characters where we find them. By contrast, in Paterson's story we are aware of a hierarchy of privilege. More important for our purposes though, in 'Waltzing Matilda' absence is privileged, or we should say rather there is a hierarchy of absences, inside and outside of the story, a hierarchy such as one might consider

characteristic of a place founded on the twin evils of exile and dispossession. To be in these landscapes is to be in exile, to be absented from the story of civilisation. Inside the story, characters find themselves absented from the action as it proceeds; a sheep, a swagman give way, in the survival of the fittest, to their betters higher up the food chain. The ghost at last is the perfect expression of this ambivalence: a ghost is an absence *cum* presence, a present absence. Haunted is how you would feel were you to think too closely on this event. It's important to remember though that the characters *in* the story, however past the pale we may consider them, are nevertheless privileged by their presence in the story, privileged over women, Aborigines, native fauna.

In Paterson's as in Lawson's landscape, there's no hospitality and there's no mateship. Instead, there's miserable, lonely, meaningless death. What of the credibility problem we mentioned before, that the action isn't properly motivated? It hardly matters when there's no God overseeing the scene. There's just the existential terror of being nowhere, finding it fatal. But no, in 'Waltzing Matilda' we have a tale so devoid of sentiment that its principal event, the death it presents, is too sudden, too meaningless for terror. This lack of sentiment in the story as told is supremely ironic when we consider the cultural value of the story and the song for Australians.

How to ethically situate oneself among these revelations? I, for one, think it's a wonderful thing Australians sing insensibly of the cold senselessness of their presence. It is apt of us to do so, if only we would think of it. Would that kind of attitude make me a patriot? Only, I hope, in the best and most perverse of Australian senses.

Truth is under the tale which haunts us; it is in lacks and absences made homely. If this song and its evocations are allowed their central place in defining Australian-ness then this signification seems to be an essentially ironic one. The unofficial song is taken – long after the event – as presaging the unconvincing nation. It reveals an ironic nationhood: nation installed in the absence of the signs of nation. We need the allegorical reading to get there but in Australia, 'Waltzing Matilda', the national song, presents itself as anti-allegory: the story of what did not happen. The techniques by which the song's ironic investments are established rest on allegorical re/framing, on imagining truths outside of, and to which, the story can refer: an audience of people addressed or

questioned or advised, a socio-legal reality in which crimes such as theft have meaning. At our souls' peril we ignore the fact that the swagman's theft is petty compared with the thefts on a grand scale which place him somewhere and give him something to steal. And so the anti-allegory points us in the direction of the anti-hoax - text and context implicate each other in a synecdochic progression. What's inside is what's outside, the merry-go-round of citation and doubtful authority goes creaking on. No one hops off to see that the hoax and/or anti-hoax concerns the nation sung; its illusions of mateship, of justice, of progress on the human scale. The point for the reader in 2004 being not so much that this song is representative of those other nation-making nineties, rather, that it's through these symbolic means that millennial Australia chooses to represent the myth of its becoming.

The 'Waltzing Matilda' story needs to be examined/re-read precisely because the words in which it consists are regularly disappeared, because where they are recalled they are emptied of meaning and sung as merely conventional phrases, as formulae the purpose of which is to include and exclude listeners, and without being seen to do so.

Ghosts may be heard? But will they be? Is a ghost allowed to speak?

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