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## A new look at "Waltzing Matilda"

### Abstract

For more than a century the song "Waltzing Matilda" has been sung by Australians at many gatherings the world over. It has become the unofficial National Anthem of Australia; in fact many would prefer it to the present National Anthem. Little thought has been given to its content that amounts to nothing more than the glorification of a brutal crime committed by three troopers and a member of the landed aristocracy.

## A New Look at “Waltzing Matilda”

Doreen Borrow

**For more than a century** the song “Waltzing Matilda” has been sung by Australians at many gatherings the world over. It has become the unofficial National Anthem of Australia; in fact many would prefer it to the present National Anthem. Little thought has been given to its content that amounts to nothing more than the glorification of a brutal crime committed by three troopers and a member of the landed aristocracy.

Australia has entered the twenty-first century and it is time Australians took another look at what they are singing about. I have written this in an attempt to expose the blatant falsehoods and slander perpetrated upon the unknown swagman, the subject of the song “Waltzing Matilda”.

The first erroneous statement to be refuted is that which claims the swagman was “jolly”. Let us get this into perspective. The definition of the word “jolly” according to the Macquarie dictionary is as follows: *Cheerfully festive or convivial. Full of life and mirth; jovial; merry.*

Only a person without knowledge of what humping the bluey entails would use that adjective to describe the demeanor of a swagman. In the past men did not go tramping about the countryside for the fun of it, for health reasons or as some fund-raising exercise for a charity.

They were men bereft of any financial support from the government, desperate for work and homeless. Who the hell would be bloody “jolly” after tramping miles on an empty belly looking for work and getting knock backs at every turn? This swagman was, in fact, a very depressed Irish fellow, down on his luck, who had had more fights than feeds and was cursing the day he had ever set foot in this god-forsaken country.

On the occasion that led to his death he had approached a squatter and inquired if there was any work to be had in return

for some tucker. The squatter, English by birth had, like many of his ilk, obtained his vast holdings by land grants or other dubious means. As with most of the English who inhabited the colony he harbored an inborn hatred of the Irish.

Upon hearing the lilting brogue of the Irish tongue he whistled up his dogs and ordered him off the property.

*“Get off my bloody land Paddy or I will sool the dogs on you!” was his reply to the poor unhappy swagman’s plea.”*

Not wishing to be savaged by the snarling brutes the swagman beat a hasty retreat back to the long paddock. To those unfamiliar this terminology, the long paddock is the land on either side of the road. The squatter had fenced off the rest, including the billabong by asserting his private proprietary rights that amounted to no more than theft from the collective.

The swaggie sat with his face in his hands pondering his fate, his shriveled stomach crying out for food, when a long-forgotten piece of information surfaced in his brain.

Back in the old days it was considered the right of those who were hungry to take a sheep and slaughter it providing the fleece was left on the fence. It is unknown if this was written into law or whether it was an unwritten law of the bush. However it has been established on good authority that this was so. It is to be noted that this largesse on the part of stockowners did not extend to the Aboriginal inhabitants who could be and often were, shot on the spot for exercising their rights to their stolen land.

The swagman decided to test this law by grabbing the nearest sheep, an old four-tooth wether rather slow of foot. Before you could say “Jack Robinson” he had killed it and, contrary to what has been written, did not put it in his tucker-bag. Anyone with the remotest acquaintance with a tucker-bag would know the impossibility of putting a whole sheep into one. And what about all that blood? It would attract even more flies than those already tormenting the fellow despite the bobbing corks hanging from his hat.

No! After hanging the fleece on the fence he lit a fire and proceeded to cook a piece of mutton he had cut from the carcass. With his billy on the boil he busied himself about the campfire whilst softly humming a few bars of *“Glory-O To the Bold Fenian*

*Men*” His blue heeler dog, with his belly filled for the first time in weeks, lay dozing contentedly beneath the shade of a gnarled old coolabah tree. This perhaps is the only time the swagman could ever be described as being “*jolly*” for the thought of a good feed had revived his flagging spirits.

The squatter, having observed this anarchistic approach to his stock, took great exception to his sheep being seconded in this fashion. However, with a heart as big as a pea and bred like a mongrel dingo, he made no attempt to take the swagman on single-handed.

He would have been aware that hunger had so weakened the swaggie that he would have been hard pressed to pull the skin off a rice pudding and anyone could have flattened him with one hand tied behind his or her back. But no! The squatter was not prepared to take him on and, mounting his thoroughbred high-tailed it to town to get back-up from the troopers who also had an abiding hatred of the Irish.

Down they rode, all four of them – the squatter on his thoroughbred, the three troopers riding horses of a lesser breed. Without further ado they set about punching and kicking the daylight out of the swagman. His explanations about the law of the bush went unheeded and the kicking and punching continued unabated until finally he was silenced.

“Struth! I think we have done for him” remarked one of the troopers.

In an effort to revive him they dragged him to a nearby billabong and threw him in. However it soon became evident that the swagman had given up the ghost. It was then they concocted the story that, having been sprung sheep stealing and rather than face a heavy goal sentence, the swagman committed suicide.

*“Let’s take him into town and get the local paper to print our story” the squatter said.*

They rode back to town with body of the swaggie and the remains of the dead sheep slung on one of the horses and made their way to the newspaper office. The fellow who owned the newspaper, and who could have taught Rupert Murdoch a thing or two accepted without question the reports given by the troopers and the squatter.

The next issue of the local rag read as follows:

*“The valiant effort on part of three local troopers to rescue a sheep stealer who had tried to escape arrest by jumping into a billabong, was unsuccessful. When pulled from the water the unidentified person was found to be dead. It was evident that he had recently been in a fight as wounds to his body were indicative of having been severely assaulted. This could account for his hasty demise for it was reported that he spent little time in the water before a rescue was attempted. Every effort was made to revive him but all proved to be futile.*

*All that is known of the deceased man is that he was Irish for, when questioned by the troopers he was reported as having made the following statement in a defiant, thick Irish brogue!*

*“You’ll never take me alive, so you won’t!”*

*The troopers involved are to be commended for their gallant actions and should be recommended for promotion and a bravery award.*

*In an interview with Mr. Squatter he sadly commented that if the poor unfortunate fellow had approached him he would have filled his tucker-bag. Instead he chose to follow the example of Ned Kelly and the many Irish who have settled in the district, by helping himself.*

*This would not be tolerated in a law-abiding community and the fate of the swagman should serve as a warning to all who thought they could live outside the law. His statement was greeted with applause from on-lookers and there was much handshaking and backslapping of the four heroes.”*

The body of the swagman was later interred in an unmarked grave in the Catholic section of the local cemetery. His identity was never established and the fate of his faithful dog went unreported. Perhaps the troopers shot it and left the carcass to be picked over by the crows.

The myth created by the squatter and the troopers became part of Australian folklore. Banjo Patterson, the composer of this farrago of lies, was himself part of the squattocracy. Those

who continue to perpetrate this myth stand condemned for their mindless repetition of what is no more than a cover-up of a brutal murder.

It has to be said that no real analysis has ever been undertaken as to the veracity of either the trooper's statements or that of the squatter. These elements of Australian society were a law unto themselves. The hostility shown to anyone Irish or of Irish descent in 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia has been well documented elsewhere

Up until the present no effort has been made to present the swagman's side of the story. This will give a more balanced approach to what really happened and to expose the wrong done to this poor Irish swagman.

The thousands of Australians who have Irish blood coursing through their veins owe it to him and to all the other Irish who suffered ill treatment under British rule to redress the vile slanders that have, for more than a century, been heaped upon this unfortunate man.

To be homeless, jobless and hungry is not a crime, and certainly does not warrant the death penalty. If any criminal content is to be found it lies with those who create the circumstances that force men to hump the bluey.

Growing up through the depression I had contact with swagmen two of whom were my older brothers. At the age of fifteen and sixteen, like thousands of others, they carried their swags. Many swaggies camped under the bridge over the Molonglo river at Captain's Flat before continuing their futile search for work. Never once did I, or one else as far as I know, recall them referring to their swag as "*Matilda*". It was always referred to as a "Bluey" as most consisted of a rough, worn, blue blanket.

Hence the expression of "*Humping the bluey*".

Others who have researched the origins of the phrase "*Waltzing Matilda*" have advanced the theory that it is of German origin.

Finally, if his ghost can be heard by those passing by the billabong it is not extending an invitation to "*Come Waltzing Matilda*" with him. It is a mournful appeal to passerbys to right the wrong done to him, to set straight the record and allow him to rest in peace.