Before we commit ourselves to barracking for Waltzing Matilda as our new national anthem, it would be as well to know exactly what we are barracking for. There is quite a list of different Matildas to choose from, and now, thanks to the devoted research of Mr. Richard Magoffin, we can put them into chronological order.

1. The original song came into existence in 1895 at Dagworth station outside Winton, Qld. Banjo Paterson wrote the words to fit a tune which Christina Macpherson played on the autoharp. This tune, which Magoffin has found in Christina's own handwriting, is quite clearly an imperfectly-remembered version of the Scottish tune, Bonnie Wood of Craigielee (or Craigielea; spellings differ).

2. This original version spread across country by word of mouth, getting gradually altered in the process. In or before 1900, it came to the ears of a musician named Harry Nathan. He was either in Toowoomba at the time, or in Townsville preparing to move to Toowoomba. Nathan wrote down this orally-altered version and gave it a piano accompaniment. By 1905 he had come to believe that he had actually composed the tune; by March 1906 he was dead of chronic alcoholism. He attributed the words to Paterson all right, but in fact the words he used are NOT exactly Paterson's. For one thing, the dreadful "jolly" has crept into the first line. Nathan's manuscript was not published before Mr. Oscar Mendelsohn was shown it in 1955.

3. In 1930 Paterson's publishers sold the musical rights to the proprietor of "Billy Tea", a Mr. Inglis. Evidently no one concerned had any knowledge of an existing tune. Mr. Inglis looked for a composer, and eventually asked Mrs. Cowan, the wife of one of his employees, to provide a tune to fit the words he had bought. Here an astonishing coincidence occurs! Mrs. Cowan evidently knew an orally-transmitted version. She proceeded to ignore Paterson's own text, and to write down both the words and tune of the word-of-mouth version which she knew. Inglis & Co. published Mrs. Cowan's version, piano accompaniment and all, and gave copies away with packets of "Billy Tea". Paterson ignored the whole business. This is a little odd, since Mrs. Cowan's version used a terribly altered and corrupted verbal text, and the poet would have been justified in protesting. The tune which Mrs. Cowan claimed only to have arranged, not composed, differs slightly from Nathan's and quite obviously from Christina's. Mrs. Cowan's piano accompaniment is rather more amateurish than Nathan's.

4. Around 1907, according to Mr. Magoffin, a perfectly distinct and different tune came into existence in the Winton/Charters Towers area, being sung to Paterson's own words. This is the one which I included in the
Penguin Australian Songbook under the title of “The Buderim Tune”. There is a claim that it was composed by a Miss Josephine Pene who used to play the piano at functions in Winton, but no manuscript has yet been found to prove it. It remained unpublished until 1959, I do not examine it in this essay: it is a separate subject.

5. In 1911 Professor Todd of Sydney University included the Cowan version in his Australian Students’ Song-Book. Copies of this, or of extracts from it, were distributed to troops in 1915, and thus Waltzing Matilda became known abroad. Paterson heard troops singing it at the Randwick staging-camp, and commented to Daryl Lindsay, “Well, Daryl, I only got a flyer for the song, but it’s worth a million to me to hear it sung like this!”

6. In 1916 or 1917 Mrs. Cowan died. Then for the first time, Paterson authorised the publication of his own original words. They appear in his third volume of poems, Saltbush Bill J.P.

7. In 1930 a visiting examiner from the Royal Schools of Music, one Dr. Thomas Wood, came to Winton, heard a mangled account of how Waltzing Matilda came to be written, wrote down the most mangled (Cowan) words and a still-further-mangled tune, and later published the lot. Wood was so earthy to believe in ghosts and pixies, and that Waltzing Matilda was pure folksong indeed the only Australian folksong. So he made no attempt to contact Paterson or Paterson’s publishers or Marie Cowan’s. In 1930 Allan & Co. held the copyright in the Cowan version, and they resented Wood’s selling their property to the Oxford University Press. Some kind of peace was patched up, however, and the smart and soulless Wood/O.U.P. version is now the best known version overseas. Paterson did not intervene in the struggle.

11.

Paterson’s abstention from commenting on the various degrees of violence which the Cowan and Wood settings had done to his words and to Christina’s tune is remarkable. I think it can be explained without attributing Paterson’s silence to a guilty literary conscience as some critics have done.

In 1939 a Mr. Copping, then a student at the Sydney Teachers’ College, wrote to Paterson asking for information about Waltzing Matilda. Paterson replied:

“I wrote it when travelling in Queensland. A Miss Macpherson, afterwards Mrs. McColl 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.”

There is one startling error in that letter. Christina Macpherson died unmarried in 1936. It was Christina’s sister Jean who became Mrs. McColl McCowan. Clearly Paterson had been quite out of touch with the Macphersons since April 1896 (the wedding day was the 16th) or earlier.

So, when Paterson in 1903 received a specimen copy of the song which he had written for Christina “McColl McCowan” to set, I think he mis-read the name of the arranger, “M. Cowan” as “McCowan”. And if he did, then some of his subsequent behaviour becomes explicable.

He had written the lyric for Christina. It was hers rather than his. If she had been obliged, for some pernickety musician’s reason, to muck his words about, then that was her look-out. She was the one and only person entitled to do so. If she had wished to muck her own tune about, then that was entirely her affair. At the same time, “her” alterations of his text had effectively robbed him of the credit which he might have claimed. Only in private, speaking as in para 5 above to a personal friend, did he claim any credit, or even mention that he was drawing no royalties on the published song.

Another thing. I have long suspected that Paterson’s “sad memories of Winton” (Jane Black’s phrase) were memories of a row with Sarah Riley over Christina. Now we know that he was out of touch with Christina, and we may believe that this was deliberate on his part. If he believed, as it appears he did, that Christina was “Mrs. McCowan” and that “Mrs. McCowan” was Marie Cowan, then his avoidance of the Cowans is explained. He had no wish to rake up embarrassing memories when he was on the point of marrying Alice Walker. Sydney May is totally misinformed on this point.

By silently countenancing the altered words of the Cowan version, he made it harder for himself to answer the question “Did you write the words?” without telling the whole story. He did not mean to tell the whole story. But, after Marie Cowan’s death, he did publish his original text—or, to be hairsplittingly accurate, a slightly revised version of the words he had given to Christina in 1895.

Paterson died in February 1941. Almost at once the journalists, radio-commentators and literary men pounced on the unsolved mystery. Several schools of comment can be distinguished. There were the ratbags who claimed to have written the words themselves. There were the old bushmen who claimed to have heard or sung Waltzing Matilda “long before Banjo was heard of”.

There were the literary men who developed that theme, and proved that Paterson must simply have doctored-up “an old bush song”. There were those who denied or minimised Christina’s role in creating or providing the tune. There were those, very interestingly, who claimed that “the tune” (few specified which tune) was derived not from Craigielea but from a British Army song The Bold Fusilier.

I do not wish to make a Homeric list of all the attackers or of all the defenders of the thesis which Mr. Magoffin has so shiningly vindicated, but I think that some of the critical points can now be finally settled.

III.

Did Paterson simply plagiarise “an old bush song”? Magoffin has demonstrated that the core of the song is history, and recent history at that. “Policemen – one, two and three” had appeared in the district only once. They were there in 1894 to disperse the shearers on strike who had just burned-down Dagworth woolshed, and to arrest the strikers’ leaders. One of these leaders was drowned in the Combo Waterhole, on the boundary of the property, while trying to escape. Please notice that this incident happened no more than a year before
Paterson visited Dagworth. No song on the refrain could be an old bush song.

But the douring is not the only element in the song: there is the “sheep-stealing swagman” element as well. Several known bush songs incidentally mention this proclivity of hungry swagmen: “The Wallaby Brigade” is one; “Tramp, tramp with swag on my back” is another. Did Paterson have one or another of these in mind? That would be very hard to say. Several accounts (quoted by May) agree that Paterson, riding around Dagworth with Bob Macpherson (or Bob’s brother Jack) had actually come upon the carcass of a wether killed by swagmen for tucker. Surely, with this experience fresh in mind, Paterson would not have needed to grope in his mind for quotations to express himself in. He was perfectly capable of writing his own words.

The third element in the lyric is the refrain, “Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?”. It is basic in a way, yet it is only lightly attached to the narrative. Clearly Paterson did not invent the phrase “Waltzing Matilda.” Did he invent the rest of the refrain? Did he invent “Matilda my darling?” Or is this much borrowed from some part-German swagman song which he heard in his boyhood and forgot until Jack Carter’s remark brought it back to mind?

The important thing is that it took a poet to weld the three disparate elements into a poem. Whoever may have provided the raw material, it was Paterson who wrote the lyric of Waltzing Matilda. And the lyric which he wrote at Dagworth is practically identical with the lyric which he published in Saltbush Bill J.P. The Ramsay manuscript (quoted by May, pp 56-7) and Christina Macpherson’s (discovered by Magoffin) make this perfectly clear.

IV.

The tune to Tannahill’s little poem Bonnie Wood of Craigielea was written by James Barr and has been in printed circulation since the 1860s. In 1894 it was worked into a march by Godfrey Parker, published in Lyons’ Band Journal, played by the Garrison Artillery band at Warrnambool Races, and heard (but imperfectly memorised) by Christina Macpherson. In 1895 she played what she could remember to Paterson on Dagworth station.

Her “mis-memorisation” is the tune which Magoffin has discovered. In bars 1 to 4 her tune is distinctly Craigielea. In bars 5 to 8, allowing for a certain confusion between crotchet and quaver, ditto. In the chorus, bars 9 to 12, there is less resemblance. In bars 13 to 16 her memory fails her: instead of using the new musical phrase which James Barr introduces here, she makes a reprise of bars 5 to 8.

In musicians’ jargon, Christina converted the A A B C structure of Craigielea into an A A B A. Nathan’s tune and Cowan’s tune of The Bold Fusilier (more about that presently) are also in A A B A form. That is, they resemble Christina’s tune more in structure than they resemble Craigielea. But in bars 3 and 4 all three are further away from Craigielea than Christina’s tune is; and in bars 9 and 10 they are closer to Craigielea than Christina’s tune is. The sum total of these points of detail is as follows:

Nathan’s tune, like Marie Cowan’s tune and the tune of The Bold Fusilier are very much like each other; and although any one of them might have been derived directly from Craigielea it seems much more likely that they are derived from Christina’s A A B A version of it, possibly by way of a lost variant whose originator had a clearer memory of bars 9 and 10 than Christina had.

The descent of Nathan’s and Marie Cowan’s tunes from Christina’s seems all the more certain since both preserve the attribution of the text to Paterson. The Bold Fusilier, of course, has its own text.

V.

The first verse and (presumably) chorus of The Bold Fusilier are thus given by Pearce and agree closely with the version known to the contributor to the Bulletin (23 July 1941) whose pen-name was “Dhas.”

“Oh a bold fusilier came marching down through Rochester
Bound for the wars in the Low Country,
And he cried as he tramped through the drear streets of Rochester
‘Who’ll be a sojer for Marlboro with me?’
‘Who’ll come a-sojering for Marlboro with me?’
And he cried as he tramped through the drear streets of Rochester
‘Who’ll come a-sojering for Marlboro with me?’

Pearce’s informant, Mrs Cooper, learnt the song in England as a child.

No other verses of The Bold Fusilier have been written down, but Mrs Cooper’s impression was that she had heard (or heard of) others in which the fusilier and a Rochester girl held a dialogue rather like that in The Banks of the Condamine. Another of Pearce’s informants, not the most reliable, speaks of “filthy” words. But please note that there is NO suggestion of the fusilier being pursued by three redcaps and drowning himself in the Medway.

Still, this first verse and chorus of The Bold Fusilier, phrase for phrase, line for line, is structurally so like the same bits of Waltzing Matilda as almost to rule out coincidence. And the structural similarity is greater with the text of Marie Cowan’s version than with any other; just as the similarity of tunes is greater. You can easily test this proposition for yourself.

So it seems to me we have to investigate the relationship of The Bold Fusilier (first verse, chorus and melody) not merely to the various Waltzing Matildas in general, but to the Marie Cowan version (first verse, chorus and melody) in particular.

VI.

The Bold Fusilier is far worse documented than Craigielea.
The well-known folksong authority A. L. Lloyd has found no trace of it in any English folksong collection, manuscript or printed.

This suggests that it is not a folksong but a literary piece.

Variants of The B.F. exist (Pearce, chap. 10), but all mention the fusilier, Rochester and Marlborough. This is odd. No Fusilier regiment is territorially connected with Rochester. No Fusilier regiment was distinguished in Marlborough's campaigns, since in those days the fusil was the weapon of humble gunner-guards. And Chattam, rather than Rochester, was the military embarkation-port for the Low Countries.

So I consider that The B.F. is not folksong, not a regimental song, and not of the Marlborough period. It could, on the other hand, be a literary man's "improvement" of an earlier (possibly army) song, like When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again or the cleaned-up version of I Want To Go Home mentioned by Robert Graves in Goodbye to All That.

What then was the earlier song? Seeing the close structural resemblance noted in section V above, I am obliged to consider the possibility of its having been an "ancestor" of the Cowan Waltzing Matilda.

Such an "ancestor" -- a variant of the Paterson/Christina-Macpherson original -- could have taken shape at any time after 1895. The South African War, to which Queensland sent a contingent, lasted from 1899 to 1902. There were many good men from the Winton area in the Queensland contingent. There were many literary men at the theatre of war: Conan Doyle, Edgar Wallace, Winston Churchill, Rudyard Kipling and others. Even Colonel Bapden-Powell wrote comic songs!

So much is fact. Now for supposition. Suppose an English literary gentleman at the South African War to have heard Queensland mounted riflemen singing some orally-transmitted ancestor of the Cowan Waltzing Matilda. Suppose him to have admired the melody but not the words. He might well have set out to provide a more soldierly and less subversive text, using as much of the first verse and chorus as he could and drawing on his remembrance of traditional army songs (such as The Gentleman Soldier) for the rest.

This hypothetical process could well have given rise to a song very much like what we know of The Bold Fusilier. The new song might have achieved some limited circulation among English troops, and gone back to England with them at the end of the war.

The main argument against my hypothesis is that several people claimed between 1941 and 1963 to have learned The Bold Fusilier from their parents or grandparents. Mrs Cooper, who gave Pearce the version which I have quoted, with its tune, is one of these people. Her memory is evidently excellent, but her grandfather (her source of information) may have been less accurate. He claimed great antiquity both for The B.F. and for Ring The Bell, Watchman. Since the latter is far less ancient than he thought ("a hundred years before my time"; Pearce, p. 61), may not the former be so too?

I do not think that my hypothesis can be proved true or false before some research has been done in South Africa particularly on army newspapers, "siege" newspapers, and concert-programmes of the period 1899-1902.

VII.

No version of Waltzing Matilda could be a good national anthem in existing conditions. The thought of Mr Bjelke-Petersen, flanked by his Country-Party supporters and police, standing up solemnly at attention to claim that they'll never take him alive, is a bit too much of a joke.

To retain the tune as a national anthem while commissioning some hack to write new words to it would be simply a smack in the eye for Banjo Paterson, and a demonstration that official Australia cares more for respectability than for poetry or truth.

No, it is far too good a song to be blighted with the Establishment's approval. As Magoffin has so ably shown, it comes straight up out of the class-struggle. It belongs to the early history of the militant Labor movement. As inheritors of the militant tradition, we of the Left must save up Waltzing Matilda to be the marching-song of a new Popular Front, or Left Coalition, in which the swagman is brother-in-arms with the industrial worker and the radical student.

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