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The Shooting of William (Billy) McLean

Abstract

Billy McLean was born in 1869 and lived at Koroit in Western Victoria. He was cut down in the prime of his life, while defending his union mates during the Shearers Strike of 1894.

Keywords

trade unions, shearers, strikes

The Shooting of William (Billy) McLean

Dennis O’Keeffe

[Note: Except where otherwise indicated all the songs and verse indicated by italics are from songs on Billy Mclean and the *Rodney* by Dennis O’Keeffe and produced in his CD *Waltzing Matilda*].

*They might fool you, but they’ll never fool me,
A hero he died, and a hero he will be,
Few men will walk where he’s gone,
The Union wrote music, young Billy sang the song.*

Billy McLean was born in 1869 and lived at Koroit in Western Victoria. He was cut down in the prime of his life, while defending his union mates during the Shearers Strike of 1894.

Much of the wool from the western and southern districts of New South Wales was transported by bullock dray to the port of Port Fairy on the Western Victorian coast, which at one time during the 1800s was second only to Sydney as the international port of Australia. Shearers would hitch rides on a bullock dray or ride their bicycles along the bullock tracks up to the Murray/Darling river systems, where they would be transported by river-boats to the shearing districts. They would travel up to NSW and Queensland at the commencement of the shearing season and work the sheds back down into Victoria. They endured terrible conditions whilst they worked sleeping in unlined huts on earthen floors, working long hours for little money, whilst being over charged for the rations they bought at the station-owned stores. The battles they fought and unique conditions they endured have made this hard working band of men the most written, talked and sung about characters in our history.

Billy McLean was one of these men.

*To earn a few bob, crutching sheep was his job, Billy was
thirteen years old,
Good money you’ll be paid, if you shear with the blade,
as a lad that’s what he was told,*

*“Son don’t go shearing,” his mother would say, it’s a
bloody rough job,
And all you will get is a broken marriage, and a flea
bitten Kelpie dog.
With his childhood spent, young Billy went, off on his
push bike with his swag,
Dreams filled his head, as he stuffed meat and bread,
into a Calico bag,
He struggled to shear his first hundred sheep, he wasn’t
like Bradman at cricket,
But he earn’t enough money to pay for his tucker, and
pay for his Union ticket.*

William John McLean was shot at Grassmere Station near Wilcannia on 26 August 1894 during the Shearers’ Strike. On the morning of the same day, another historical event had taken place a little further down the Darling River. That was the burning of the paddle steamer the *Rodney*.

There can be little doubt that McLean was deliberately shot in revenge for what the shearers had done to the *Rodney* earlier that morning. Obviously, from these events alone it was a frantic day in western NSW. The paddle steamer, the *Rodney*, was transporting non-union labor to the shearing shed at Tolarno Station, when it was boarded by a raiding party of union shearers from the nearby strike camp. After a fight with the crew the blacklegs were removed from the boat. The *Rodney* was then doused with kerosene and burnt to the water-line. It has been recorded that while the *Rodney* was burning a young union shearer ‘annexed a concertina’ from somewhere and played ‘After the Ball is Over’.

*After we burnt the Rodney, We danced on the river-bank,
There we played an old tune, until the Rodney sank,
Many a heart was happy, if you could only see,
We had a blood great bonfire, The night we burnt the
Rodney.*

Many of the men who worked on the river, including the riverboat captains were sympathetic to the struggles of the union shearers and would not assist the pastoralists with transportation of non-union labor. The skipper of the *Rodney*, Captain Dickson was active during the 1891 strike transporting non-union labor on his boat, so now that he was doing it again in ‘94 the shearers took a particular dislike to him.

*You called me a bastard, What have I done?
You scabbed you bastard, in ‘91.*

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*And what's more, you son of a whore,
You scabbed again, in '94.*

(Traditional oath, collected D. O'Keefe)

The remains of the Rodney are still in the Darling River and are visible at the low water mark. The burning of the Rodney was the only act of inland piracy recorded in Australia's history.

*Once there was a captain, of a riverboat,
With forty-five free labourers, on the Darling they did
float,
The year was 1894, the strikes had just begun,
And shearer's blood was being spilt, far worse than '91.*

The events preceding and following this episode, when linked with surrounding occurrences, indicated the escalating nature of the conflict and the utter determination of the unionist shearers to uphold their position in the 1894 strike.

Eight days after the *Rodney* was burnt, Samuel Hoffmeister, a staunch unionist, together with a band of union shearers from the Kynuna strike camp mounted a raid on Dagworth station in Western Queensland early on the morning of 2 September 1894. Dagworth station was owned by the Macpherson brothers. Early in August, union shearers had refused to sign the 1894 agreement. The Dagworth shed was ready to start shearing with non-union labour and the shed was filled with lambs for shearing to commence in the morning. Despite guards being posted the station was attacked, some 90 shots were fired. The shearing shed was burnt to the ground and the sheep perished in the flames. Pursued by three police constables from nearby Kynuna who were accompanied by the squatter Bob Macpherson, and with a thousand pound reward on his head, Hoffmeister burnt some personal papers in the campfire and according to official police reports, shot himself.

*Up came the Squatter a-riding his thoroughbred,
Up came Policemen—one, two and three,
Whose is that jumbuck you've got in the tucker-bag,
You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.
The swagman he up and he jumped in the water-hole,
Drowning himself by the coolabah tree,
And his ghost may be heard as it sings in the billabongs,
Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?*

(A.B. Paterson)

During the tumultuous Eight Days in 1894, this series of violent events took place and focused the eyes of the nation upon trouble in the back country. Before these events the unionists had shown passive resistance, restrained obstruction, mild forms of sabotage, humour and larrikinism. Union leadership was active in maintaining order, issuing their own marshals to vigilantly control union behavior in townships. This gave rise at times to whole townships coming out in favor to support, clothe and feed the blossoming strike camps. But the squatters were continuing to become more vindictive with oppression and repressive laws.

Into this turbulent class war strode a young Sydney solicitor and poet by the name of Andrew Barton Paterson, who was writing under the pen name of 'The Banjo'. It was during this shearing strike that a sequence of events took place that culminated in 'The Banjo' writing a song that is now known throughout the world and forever stamped in the psyche of all Australians. Shortly after the Dagworth shearing shed was burnt down, Banjo Paterson arrived at Dagworth station with his fiancée of eight years, Sarah Riley. During their stay at the homestead, Banjo, a keen horseman, was shown the property on horseback by (the squatter) Bob Macpherson. During his stay at Dagworth, one evening Bob's sister Christina played a lovely little Scottish tune she had heard at the Warrnambool races in Western Victoria earlier in 1894. Paterson asked if the tune had any words, to which Christina replied it did not. Paterson then wrote some lyrics for the tune and *Waltzing Matilda* was born.

*Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda my darling,
Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?
Waltzing Matilda and leading a waterbag,
Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?*

(A.B. Paterson)

Although the beginnings of the Australian Labor Party are often disputed, there is little doubt the 1891 shearers strike galvanized the efforts of all those concerned with establishing the new political party formed the year earlier. Under an agreement drawn up in August 1891 between the Pastoralists' Federal Council and the Amalgamated Shearers' Union the shearers were forced to accept 'open' sheds and reduced rates for shearing. The 1892 season was quiet, and 1893 was disturbed only by a comparatively small amount of trouble over the wages of rouseabouts, or shedhands. The Pastoralists' Association, in 1894, repudiated the agreement of 1891, calling for 'freedom

of contract' and attempted to impose a new agreement on the shearers, largely it seems, to break the power of the AWU, to which the shearers of NSW and Victoria now belonged.

Whitely King on behalf of the pastoralists in NSW, Victoria and South Australia issued a notice wanting the Pastoralists' Union to have complete freedom of contract and also lowering the price of shearing by about three shillings per hundred. The AWU as it was now termed was the only large union that had maintained its strength and vigor after the maritime trouble of 1890. Three years of relative harmony had made it strong in numbers, but the Pastoralists' Union was prepared to break the union and had all the powers of the government and press behind it. The pastoralists' agreement held a most objectionable clause, (clause 8) which placed the sheds under the unequivocal control of the owner or shed boss. Any shearer refusing to shear wet sheep or carry out duties as directed would be in breach of the agreement and would thus be liable for criminal prosecution.

The Pastoralists' Union also proposed to cut the machine-shearing rate by 12.5 per cent, and insisted on using labourers from Victoria and New Zealand. Given the incompetence of most 'scabs', this was a provocation rather than a serious attempt to complete the shearing. When the shearers refused to accept the terms of the new agreement and the pastoralists would not submit their case to arbitration, a fresh strike developed.

*Squatters were sowing, seeds for growing, the old
English working class vine,
While they pissed in the pocket of the Gentleman's Club,
sipping on whisky and wine,
But Republican blood, again and again, through shearers
veins ran like a torrent,
The Squatters wanted to cut this vein, and sign the
Unions death warrant.*

The 1894 strike began closer to the season beginning, thus providing the shearers with a tactical advantage. The strike was widespread—Queensland, NSW, and parts of South Australia and Victoria. The strikers and their sympathisers immediately formed new camps near many of the larger stations in the hope of intimidating 'would be scabs', and a number of violent incidents occurred. Undaunted by the loss of work and its consequent hard times, undaunted by imprisonment or any other suffering, the true unionists stood their ground and won many victories. Nevertheless the results proved a serious blow to the union. The fight started in July and by mid-August thousands of men were

on strike and had to be maintained in various camps. Whole towns came out in support of the unionists as strike camps were set up along the Murray and Darling River systems and at major rail-heads throughout NSW. and Queensland. Additional police troopers were rushed to the trouble spots. The strike lasted for several months. At the end of August 1894, the violence escalated to the extent that meetings were held in Sydney and a bill was tabled in Queensland Parliament to deal with the trouble in the west.

The shearers' union would camp at a central site. As various properties were to commence shearing the shearers would report to hear the conditions. Often they would reject the conditions outright and return to the camp. Considering that flocks in the west could exceed 100,000 sheep, pastoralists were in a dilemma with sheep with a full years wool, no income and warmer weather approaching.

Secret police were sometimes used to infiltrate the ranks of shearers. Sometimes these would trade information. They would sometimes sign on for shearing and attempt to lead others to follow. However the true shearers were resolute throughout.

As the strike reached boiling point in Western Queensland, down in NSW the trouble in the outback was attracting national attention. On 26 August, Billy McLean and about fifty of his mates set out for Grassmere shed near Wilcannia, where it was said 'scabs' from New Zealand had started work. McLean was first to enter the shed and was felled by a bullet in the lung. Jack Murphy, one of his mates was also shot. On the way back to the Wilcannia strike camp they were arrested by police. The following are some of the articles that appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* relating to the shooting of Billy McLean.

**PASTORALISTS AND SHEARERS.
SERIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF THE DISPUTE
TROUBLE ON THE DARLING.
A STEAMER BURNT AND SUNK
FOUR MEN WOUNDED**

The shearing difficulty in New South Wales is assuming rather a serious character, especially in the Western districts, and several alarming rumors were current yesterday, particularly in political circles, in regard to outrages and the violence perpetrated by unionist shearers. The report received yesterday by the Government showed that the Darling country is in a very disturbed condition,

and requests for further assistance had led to the dispatch of reinforcements of police. The unionist shearers who are causing the trouble are said to be nearly all Melbourne men, and many of them are described as very rough characters. About 650 men are reported to be in a camp at Wilcannia. Yesterday the Colonial Secretary, Mr. Bruncker received a report from the Inspector General of Police stating that there was a great disturbance at Grassmere and that reinforcements of police were required. The statement that four men had been shot, and that one of them had since died was described to the Inspector General as apparently only a rumour. It is generally expected that the subject will be brought up in The House tonight by the Labor members, and that it will give rise to a lengthened debate.

A special Act was promulgated to appoint 'special constables'—that is, any local who would accept the appointment.

SMH 28 August 1894

RIOT AT NETTALIE STATION. TWO MEN SHOT

Wilcannia, Monday

A terrible affray is reported as having occurred at Grassmere woolshed, on Nettalie Station, last night. A mob of unionists attempted to rescue the free labourers, and the police had to resort to the use of firearms, resulting in one unionist being shot dead and two others being badly wounded. It is reported that one of the free labourers was shot dead by a unionist. The wounded men are on the way to Wilcannia. Doctor Atkins, accompanied by Sub-Inspector Webb and four constables has left to meet them. About 600 unionists who are located here have all gone out to meet the escort with the wounded men. One arrest is reported to have been made so far. More police protection is needed immediately, and the mayor is telegraphing to The Premier to that effect.

Later

Further details of the affray at Grassmere are at hand. Two men were not shot dead as reported. But two unionists were shot with a revolver. Both are alive, but one is in a critical condition. It appears that shortly before nine o'clock last night about 100 unionists arrived at Grassmere outside the men's hut. The police station there heard a stampede of men. Senior Sergeant, McDonagh came out and the

unionists informed him that they wanted to take the free labourers, stating they were armed as well as the police and were determined to have the men at any cost. The sergeant replied that they would not be allowed to do so. He was immediately assaulted and received a blow on the head, felling him to the ground. The mob then rushed the free labourers' hut, smashing the door in with a battering ram. The police fired shots, as also did one of the free laborers, who was armed with a revolver. Two of the unionists were wounded in the affray. Shortly after the shots were fired the unionists retreated, taking the two union men.

SMH 28 August 1894

THE GRASSMERE AFFRAY.

THE PRISONERS BROUGHT UP AND REMANDED

The men who were wounded in the Grassmere affray are progressing favorably. The doctor says there is a probability of both recovering. Yesterday evening, at the gaol, William McLean and John Murphy were charged before Mr. Charles Robertson P.M., that they did on or about the 26 instant, at Grassmere, unlawfully and tumultuously assemble and create a riot. Sub-Inspector Webb gave evidence to the effect that on the morning of the 27th he met a wagonette containing the two accused about five miles from Wilcannia, He arrested them and charged them with being concerned in a riot at Grassmere on the 26th. He prayed for a remand for eight days for the production of further evidence. The accused were accordingly remanded...

SMH 29 August 1894

McLean was eventually brought to court, charged with 'unlawful assembly' and convicted. He was sentenced to three years hard labour and sent to Goulburn jail. The scab that shot McLean was never questioned and was given a medal by the Pastoralists' Association.

*Men were willing, strike camps were filling, on the banks
of the Darling River,
The man on the land, who never dirtied his hand, with
fear, He began to shiver,
Billy led a band of good Union men, out to the Grassmere
Station,
Where Blackleg Shearers and Troopers with guns,
awaited the confrontation.*

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*Billy was shot, and Murphy they got, ambushed at the
shearing shed door,
We never can forget, dags and sweat, mixed with blood
on the shearing shed floor,
Not one Union son, fired a gun, yet nine were arrested
and tried,
The coward that shot them was given a medal, and sent
to Tasmania to hide.*

McLean, wounded in the lung, and in the coldness of his prison cell, developed tuberculosis of the lung. In 1895, so that he would not die in prison, he was released and sent home to his widowed mother in Koroit. After his death, his comrades rallied to the aid of his mother and a collection of 90 pounds was raised for a monument. The monument was erected and stands today at Tower Hill cemetery near Koroit.

Erected by
HIS FELLOW UNIONISTS
AND ADMIRERS
IN MEMORY OF THEIR COMRADE,
WILLIAM JOHN McLEAN
WHO WAS SHOT BY A NON-UNIONIST
AT GRASSMERE STATION, N.S.W.,
DURING THE STRUGGLE
OF 1894, AND
WHO DIED 22nd MARCH, 1896,
AGED 26 YEARS,
A GOOD SON, A FAITHFUL MATE,
AND A DEVOTED UNIONIST,
UNION IS STRENGTH.

Donald MacDonell, General Secretary of the AWU wrote to Henry Lawson asking him to write the epitaph of 'Billy McLean'. In the letter MacDonell said, 'I want you to write the epitaph of Billy McLean, who between the blackleg who put a bullet in him, and the Government who prosecuted and imprisoned him, was done to death in the trouble of '94'. It is not known for sure if Lawson did write the memorial, but many believe the simplicity and dignity of the words on the monument indicate he may have.

William Spence and Donald MacDonnell later wrote:

In the quaint little town of Tower Hill situated near Koroit, one of the most beautiful spots in Victoria, and within sound of the eternal roll of the Southern Ocean, lies the

body of William John McLean, who was shot at Grassmere during the Bush Strike of 1894.

Worker, 27 October 1900



To his memory this memorial has been erected.

The idea of the Memorial originated with the Bourke A.W.U. Committee, of which McLean was a member.

The monument is of red Scotch granite polished on four faces. The bottom base is of bluestone, finely rubbed and diamond hammered, on which stands a rock-faced base chamfered and margined. There is then a polished base with the emblem artistically carved--a bundle of sticks tied with a ribbon on which is engraved "Union is Strength". Above this is the center stone, on

which the inscription is inscribed. The inscription is cut into the stone and gilded. This is all surrounded with a large column, polished and broken at the top-- the column being an unfinished work, emblematically of an unfinished life. The grave is enclosed with bluestone kerbing and a cast-iron fence, twisted bar pattern. The monument and kerbing are fixed on foundations of brick and cement. The total height of the Monument is about 14 feet.

*So down on the slops of Tower Hill, where the tide rolls in
with the ocean,
The Union gathered to bury their dead, in memory of his
devotion,
Take care you tyrants, who cheat and sting, the tide may
turn when you die,
For it's yet to be seen, if men like McLean, run the picket-
line up in the sky.*

William John McLean (born William James McLean on his birth certificate) was the sixth born of eleven children. He was born on 22 October 1869. His father was Lachlan McLean, labourer, age 32 from Cromarty in Scotland. His mother Emma Cole was from Devonshire in England and came on the ship British Empire in 1857 to Portland. She was 27 years of age when Billy was born.

For many years after his death, a pilgrimage was made each year to his graveside. In 1936, the 40th anniversary of his death, union leaders from all over Australia gathered at his grave to pay tribute to his memory.

Billy McLean's part in the 1894 strike and the circumstances of the times can be gauged by the two outstanding monuments to him—the gravestone monument at Tower Hill and 'William McLean House'—The Victorian Office Building of the Australian Workers' Union. The South Western District (Victoria) Trades and Labor Council holds an annual McLean memoration dinner.

William McLean.

J.K. McDougall copyright 1896.

*True son of a Labor mother —
A son who was straight and brave;
Not long ago with another,
I stood by your southern grave.
And absorbed in the heart's communion,
We spoke of you there as we praised,
The stone that a fighting Union
Had over your ashes raised.*

*We heard the waves of the ocean,
As they came in battalions grand,
And broke in pulsating motion,
On the beach of your native land.
And we talked of the Union's battles
And the valour of distant days—
Of the camps in the flow'ring wattles
And the roads in the dusty haze.*

*We spoke of the deeds of Semple'
In the pride of his fighting years;
We went back to Spence and Temple,
And the rest of the pioneers.
We talked of the times and changes,
Of heroes that came and went—
Of the rides on the sunset ranges,
And the meeting in hut and tent.*

*We stood by your grave bareheaded,
For the sake of the men below,
Who never a danger dreaded,
In his bouts with the common foe—
Who never as scab or traitor,
Went back on a pledge he gave,
For the gold of a Union hater,
Or the plea of a cultured knave.*

*You gave your life for the workers,
You died for the worker's cause—
The victim of scabs and shirkers,
A martyr of felon laws.
But the fight that you fought for others,
Your courage and rebel fate,
Are a call to your Union brothers,
A creed for each Union mate.*

*You sleep in the shine and shadow
Of Illowa's grassy dunes,
Where the larks sing over the meadow,
And the sheoak at sunset croons,
You rest where the gulls fly over
The land from the calling sea,
To the reaches of rye and clover—
And light may your slumber be!*

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W.G. Spence wrote the following tribute to McLean and his place in Union history:

An enthusiastic Unionist and one of the most enthusiastic active spirits in the '94 strike. The role of a union organiser was a dangerous one and not for the faint-hearted. They risked being assaulted by landowners, and arrested on trumped up charges for simply advocating the union position.

During that time Grassmere Station got a blackleg crew to start under the notorious Pastoralist Union agreement. Police were on hand to safeguard these men (the scabs). It was known the latter were armed, and rumoured they would shoot, but nothing daunted a number of unionists, of whom Billy McLean was one, determined to interview them and try and get them to cast aside a tyrannical agreement. Billy McLean was one of the first to enter their hut. He had no sooner entered then, without a word of warning he was fired on and fell with a bullet through his lung. His mate John Murphy fell by his side.

Billy McLean was arrested, charged with 'unlawful, assembly', and sentenced to three years imprisonment. Imprisonment to a man with a bullet drilled lung meant taking away any chance of recovery, But the law had to be vindicated claimed the authorities. With all their zeal for its vindication, however they did not think it necessary to call upon the man who had shot him for an explanation. A member of the Pastoralists' Union actually presented him with an 'Abbott Cross', for valour displayed in shooting down an unarmed man, but still the authorities made no sign. If a policeman had done it he would have faced an inquiry, but a blackleg was evidently above the necessity of any such formality.

Billy McLean was sentenced to Goulbourn gaol—the coldest and most trying in the colony. To a weak lunged person. He grew so bad that he was sent to Parramatta. The doctor there, who evidently had more humanity or more medical knowledge than the Goulbourn and Wilcannia medicos, recommended his liberation. He was shortly after liberated having completed about one third of his sentence.

But the hand of Death was upon him. The yearning to see his poor old mother and the friends he had left in his health and vigour gave him strength to struggle home, but it was his last effort. He no sooner reached home than he took to his bed and never rose from it—done to death if ever as man

was by a barbarous imprisonment.

What he suffered no-one knows. The loss of freedom, the contact with criminals to one who had never known either previously, would be hard enough to bear. But what must it have been to one who had only known the loving kindness of friends in any sickness he had, to have the attention of cold and callous prison officials in his mortal illness.

If he did break a law—a law made by masters, he did it, not for any personal gain, but for what seemed to him the good of his fellows. And grievously too did he pay for the breach.

The law brands him as a criminal. But the workers, for whom his life was sacrificed, will regard him as a martyr.

While no memorial—‘no storied urn or animated bust’ -is needed to keep his memory green among them, they are yet hopeful at the proof of their regard for his memory which find expression in this way, will afford some little consolation to his widowed mother, bereft of the prop of her declining years.

And while extending their deepest sympathy to her, they also cherish the hope that Compulsory Arbitration Acts may be enacted in all the colonies, by which the bitterness of industrial conflict with these sad results may be averted, and there be no more bereaved parents and martyred McLeans to condole with and mourn for.

signed W.G. Spence President A.W.U.
D. MacDonnell Gen. Sec.
Worker, 27 October 1896

Billy McLean

Dennis O'Keefe—Lyrics ©

*Sung to the tune of
'James Connolly'*

*Where, oh where is young Billy McLean?
Where, oh where is that gallant man?
He's gone to organise the union,
That working men they might yet be free.*

*Then who, then who will lead the va?,
Then who, then who will lead the van?
Then who, but our young Billy,
The hero of the working man.*

*Where, oh where, have our shearers gone?
Where, oh where, is that gallant band?
They've gone to fight for the workers union,
That working men they might yet be free.*

*Who carried no gun when they shot him down,
Who carried no gun when they shot him down,
Who, but our young Billy,
To Goulburn Jail they sentenced him.*

*This wounded man could not survive,
This innocent man could not survive,
They sent him home to his lonely mother,
And lay him in his bed to die.*

*Who mourns the death of this great man,
Who mourns the death of this great man,
Oh bury him down, in yon green garden,
With union men on every side.*

*So they buried him down, in yon green garden,
With union men on every side,
And they swore they would form a mighty union,
That young Bill's name might be filled with pride.*