

SINGABOUT

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12TH NATIONAL FOLKLORE CONFERENCE

A Report from 12th National Folklore Conference 2017 (part 2)

From R.D. Dengate

Papers presented at the NFC give a sample of the wide range of research being done in this field. With little money or Government support many collectors and dedicated folklorists locate and preserve the folklore of various people.

The first session of the Conference with papers from Emma Dixon, and Sue and Don Brian [reported in last *Singabout*] was followed by Jeanette Mollenhauer. This was on folkdance and preservation. Jeanette titled her presentation :

Why is this relevant? Performing the Blato kumpanjija in Sydney. Accompanied by videos of the dancing and music, some filmed at the fiftieth anniversary on 25/4/2015 in Sydney, Jeannette was able to illustrate some of the unique dances from the island of Korcula off the coast of Croatia, known as kumpanjija. On the island of Korcula, Croatia each of the six towns has its own version of a chain sword dance. These performances can be traced back eight hundred years in celebration of St. Vincenza. Now there are more people in Terry Hills, Australia who migrated from Blato, who maintain the practice of this ritual dance than in the old communities.

Jeanette, who is completing her PhD at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music is interested in understanding the relevance of traditional practices in twenty first century Australia. Her presentation examined issues of authenticity, innovation and nostalgia.

In the third session on Australian folksong, the death in March of Danny Spooner, reminded us of the loss to the world of folk music. Danny would have presented the paper

with Ross Both on **New Chums and Diggers: the history of Australian mining fields through song**. Although born in London, Danny sang the songs from Britain and Australia and brought life to many a singing session with his wide knowledge and ability to lead others in joining the singing of historical and traditional verses.

Ross Both, a retired geologist maintains a wide interest in mining history and is active in the Australian Mining History Association. He has researched songs from the mining fields and the life of the gold digger. As well as songs that may have been sung round the campfire, he found evidence of the music performed by the professional entertainers. He feels that many mining historians overlooked songs recording the experience of miners. Many of the authors of the songs were lost over time as the songs were passed around the itinerant singers and workers

However, Charles Thatcher recorded the picture of life on the Victorian goldfields during 1850s and 1860s. Samples of the mining songs appear in the newspapers of the times and songs also refer to disasters on the mine fields, racial tensions and political unrest as well as the introduction of new technologies.

This was followed by Mark Gregory: **Shearing and what is a folk song?**

Mark asked me to assist his presentation and share his research and the editing of his copious amounts of material researched from Trove - the amazing resource from the National Library. Also, Mark recalled, because I was editor of the BMC publication Songs of the Shearer, 1970.

Mark wrote that like so many at this years National Folklore Conference I have tried to devise a clear understanding of what we mean by folklore and folk song over a century after Paterson's collection Australian Bush Songs. Paterson was convinced that the bush songs were in their dying days but he didn't and couldn't have reckoned with the 1950s folk song revival. Dozens of unpaid collectors spent their weekends and holidays rescuing and reviving what they could and that propelled this quest for a better understanding of the nature of and Australian-ness of the material they discovered, recorded material that today has pride of place in this National Library.

New approaches included an interest in oral history and the literary origins of so many of the collected songs, an interest in children's folklore, the seemingly universal lore of school playground rhymes, beliefs, games and songs.

My interest has long been the lore that bears U.S Shipwright and folklorist Archie Green's term "Labor Lore", or Industrial Folk Song as A.L.Lloyd proposed. Not that they were the first as anyone aware of Pete Seeger's Folkways 1962 LP "Industrial Ballads" would be aware. Before that Seeger and Woody Guthrie coined the title "Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People" a collection whose publication was delayed by many years of McCarthyism and the inquisition known as the Red Scare. Perhaps because of my interest in this I have come to believe that Industrial song and poetry can be better named, and I have chosen Working Songs as an appropriate name, following the work of the great Roy Palmer in the UK.

Australia's interest in shearing songs, railway songs, navy songs, bush songs, the songs of the bullock driver, the water side workers or lumpers, stockmen, bush rangers

and sailors, convict ballads and so on provide essential details of working life and the growth of workers organs of resistance, and solidarity in the face of hegemonic power. As much as anything these songs found in abundance in Australian newspapers, providing a colourful picture of the evolution of Australian political changes. The Shearers especially stand out in the number of songs alone, which is why Dale Dengate and I will be concentrating on those today.

Dale sang *Send her down a little bit harder, dear old Hughie do*, to give an example of a working song or more accurately a stop work song! Sometimes known as the *Rouseabout's Hymn* it started with a chorus sung by Dutchy, friend of Duke Tritton when he used a popular tune from 1910, 'Obadiah do!'

I had the opportunity to talk with Duke while driving him and John Dengate home after a night at BMC.

Duke told the story of how it came to be written:

During the morning tea break from shearing, rain began falling. Ten points were needed to stop the shearing, so Dutchy sang his chorus to general applause, especially from the rouseabouts, who were paid no matter what the weather conditions. Dutchy suggested Duke, who had shown a keenness to write, add verses.

So several verses were written by Duke Tritton to go with the chorus.

So with no other entertainment but what they could produce these work related songs were sung in the long hours the shearers and itinerant workers spent together at night or while it rained.

Another work related song was *Lachlan Tigers*.

I recall the Wild Colonial Boys singing a very up beat version on the Sydney Town Hall stage during an early folk concert in the early 1970s. This tune sounded very different the way the Bush Music Club sang it in the tradition of Sally Sloane. She used *Nickerbocker Line*.

It was printed in the *Songs of the Shearer* with pages straight out of Singabout Songsters. I had suggested a songster to go with Concert Party performance at Easter Show, 1970. Jamie Carlin secured some funding from the Premier's Office.

A popular BMC song about the separation of couples caused by work was *Banks of Condamine* or *Riverine*, 1894 It comes from a long line of traditional songs such as *Banks of the Nile* from early 1800s with the traditional story of separation between woman and man who is setting off for work or war. One might ask why so few songs were collected about women's work and experiences – this needs another paper – but often women sang or whistled while working to rollicking rhythms. Also as they were seldom itinerant workers so their songs were not carried by the oral tradition.

I concluded my few examples from Mark's many discoveries of industrial songs, published in Trove with *The Ballad of 1891* by Palmer and Jacobs; however, I will deal with this in the next report.

There are so many written and published words about shearers that it was difficult to

select a few to share with you in order to examine the Australian traditions in folklore. I tried to show some of the transformations and examine the concept of 'folksong'.

Mark and I concluded that the Australian ballad was:

unashamedly written for oral transmission to be shared and often sung together with like minded folk.

Often they were industrial songs or work related as they actually sung while relaxing after work. They were not work rhythm songs as in sea shanties. The itinerant lifestyles help spread songs.

Subjects included were Union organisations with dire threats to 'scabs and black-legs', or songs about the bosses and government authorities who came in for a fair share of criticism. Food and cooks were important topic, but there was little female representation. This is an area that Mark Gregory and I plan to research and write about at some later stage.

The Shearer's Wife

Louis Essen from "Bells and Bees" (1910)

Before the glare o' dawn I rise
To milk the sleepy cows, an' shake
The droving dust from tired eyes.
I set the rabbit traps, then bake
The children's bread.

There's hay to stook, an' beans to hoe,
Ferns to cut i' th' scrub below;
Women must work, when men must go
Shearing from shed to shed.

I patch an' darn, now evening comes,
An' tired I am with labour sore,
Tired o' the bush, the cows, the gums,
Tired, but must dree for long months more
What no tongue tells.

The moon is lonely in the sky,
The bush is lonely, an' lonely
I Stare down the track no horse draws nigh
An' start ... at the cattle bells.