

Waltzing Matilda

by Paul Millard

Most countries have a unique piece of music that means something special to its people. For many of those celebrating Australia Day this week, it's a song called 'Waltzing Matilda', written in 1895 by a song-writer and poet known as 'Banjo' Paterson. It's a song that, for many, evokes the unique feel of the country, yet tells a very simple story.

The song

Before we go any further, read the lyrics.

Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong
Under the shade of a coolibah tree
And he sang as he watched and waited 'til his billy boiled
Who'll come a-waltzing matilda with me?

Chorus; Waltzing matilda, matilda my darling
You'll come a-waltzing matilda with me
And he sang as he watched and waited 'til his billy boiled
Who'll come a-waltzing matilda with me?

Down came a jumbuck to drink at the billabong
Up jumped the swagman and grabbed him with glee
And he sang as he shoved that jumbuck in his tucker bag
You'll come a- waltzing matilda with me

(Chorus)

Down came the squatter, mounted on his thoroughbred
Down came the troopers, one, two, three
'Whose is that jumbuck that you've got in your tucker-bag?
You'll come a-waltzing matilda with me!'

(Chorus)

Up jumped the swagman and jumped into the billabong
'You'll never take me alive!' said he
And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong
You'll come a-waltzing matilda with me

(Chorus)

If you are a little confused, don't worry! Some of the most important words are only used in Australia and the story isn't obvious to many speakers of English. In short, a travelling worker camps next to a lake and heats some water. A sheep comes for a drink at the lake and the man catches it and puts it in a bag. Then the sheep farmer arrives on his horse, with three policemen. Instead of being captured and sent to prison, the man jumps into the lake and dies.

By the way, the 'matilda' is the swagman's sleeping blanket, rolled up for carrying. 'Waltzing matilda' probably refers to the act of carrying it around the country. Alternatively, the swagman was dancing with his blanket!

So, the story is a universal one – a conflict between poor and rich, in which the poor man loses but defiantly keeps his pride. It may have gained extra significance and popularity because of the things that were happening in Australia at that time.

The writing of Waltzing Matilda

Although Banjo Paterson lived in Sydney, the song was written while he was visiting the interior of the country – known as the Outback, a tough place where only a few people lived, mostly by farming sheep and cows. Paterson went to Queensland in the north of the country, where, a few months earlier, there had been a lot of tension and conflict. The shearers – workers who travelled around the farms, cutting the wool from the sheep – wanted more money from the sheep farmers. The shearers went on strike, meaning that they stopped working. There had been a lot of anger and violence.

In January 1895, Paterson was staying with the Macpherson family on their sheep farm near Winton in Queensland. Some people say that during the strike a building on the farm had been burned down and many sheep had died. Guns were fired during the incident. The next day, the leader of the workers was found dead near a lake.

Yet it was here, among the owners of the land, that Banjo Paterson wrote this song in apparent sympathy with the poor workers. He gave the song its words, but the music was probably provided by Christina Macpherson, the sister of the sheep farmer. She didn't write it, but she had remembered the tune, called 'Craigielee' being played in the south of Australia the year before.

Waltzing Matilda – Australia's anthem?

The song became very popular in Australia, although it existed in three different forms. In the 1970s, it nearly became Australia's official national anthem, to be played at major events like the opening of parliament and international matches in football and rugby. Until 1974, Australia's anthem was the same as Britain's – God Save the Queen. Many people were dissatisfied with this and votes were held in 1974 and 1977. Waltzing Matilda came in second, with nearly 30% of the vote. Popular, but not as popular as 'Advance Australia Fair', a song dating from 1878. This begins with the line, 'Australians all let us rejoice, for we are young and free', and goes on to praise Australia as a nation. It is more typical of a national anthem than a story of a man who takes a sheep and then jumps in a lake, but perhaps it is less typically Australian.

Whatever the official anthem is, for many Australians 'Waltzing Matilda' will continue to be their real national song.