

OUR FIRST FOLK SONG

by John Meredith

Extract from *Singabout* Feb 1980

A local historian friend, Bruce Knox drew my attention to what must surely be the first song of the white settlers to undergo oral transmission.

Malbrooke or *Marlborough Has Gone to the War*, otherwise *Malbrouck S'en Va-T'en Guerre*, as given here is taken from the Liverpool University Students' Song Book of 1906. Variants of this not really plaintive melody will be recognised as those used for *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* and at least one Lodge song.

John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722), was a brilliant soldier, the victor of Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet, and was married to Queen Anne's favourite, Sarah Jennings. His name is used in connection with another song of that period, *The Bold Fusilier*, of which, more later.

Because of its early use in the colony it would be interesting to hear this melody used for some contemporary words, other than the rather banal *Foreeza*.

Malbrouck S'en Va T'en Guerre



Malbrouck S'en Va T'en Guerre
Malbrouck s'en va-t'en guerre
Miron-ton, miron-ton, miron-taine!
Malbrouck s'en va-t'en guerre...
Ne sais quand reviendra!
Ne sais quand reviendra!
Ne sais quand reviendra!
Malbrouck s'en va-t'en guerre
Ne sais quand reviendra!

SINGABOUT

DECEMBER 2014

"THE BUSH" BY DON WATSON

SOCIAL and POLITICAL ASPECTS

This is a superb treatise by Don Watson, author of "Recollections of a Bleeding heart" among others. He demonstrates a clear understanding of the difference in affection between the country and the bush. That is, those who love wheat fields yet loathe bushland. The former are often introverted and conservative voting with many of them viewing the bush as "scrub", a pejorative word for useless.

The author has done his homework and invokes Turner's frontier thesis regarding the forging of a national ethos. If it moves shoot it, if it doesn't, chop it down. The Europeans forgot, or chose to ignore, the careful nurturing of the land in Europe ... a kind of madness prevailed in Australia Felix.

Watson addresses a strange social side of Australians and their relationship to the bush neatly when he reminds us of AL Lloyd's observation that astonishingly few Australian songs are about love...lots about sheep shearing and droving: yet less than 10% reside outside the cities and towns. Food for thought for our songwriters of the future

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

The question of economic development is where Watson excels. He shows his appreciation and understanding of the nature of the bush where droughts are the norm. To Watson and others drought relief is like giving a junkie another hit. Australia was, almost from the start of white settlement, an economic Eldorado thanks to cash from Britain and high interest rates in Australia. By 1850 the mighty bush was a giant sheep-walk which was, as Lawson so aptly stated, about to be tethered with iron rails to the world. In a sad and poignant reminder Watson posits that the destruction of blacks provided Lebensraum for sheepmen; a phrase to chill the heart.

ENVIRONMENTAL VANDALISM and SOME HOPE

Watson maintains that both European and Aborigines changed the landscape and domesticated the wilderness. To the newly arrived Europeans, Sydney was seen as a gentleman's park ...low burns by natives saw to that and had done so for more than 50,000 years. Yet in 1936 the philosopher, Passmore, in 1936 noting ring-barked gum trees observed that the "invaders hated trees".

The statistics in this book are staggering ...such, such research! For example, more people are killed in the bush by lightning than by snakes; 600,000 feral camels eat up 80% of all plant species in their habitat; bilbys, bandicoots, bettongs and 100 other native species are now under threat of extinction from feral cats.

The author reminds us that Angus McMillan brought willow cuttings planted on St Helena by Napoleon Bonaparte. The invasion of foreign species of plants and animals is exemplified by Watson's note that European Carp killed life in creek near his home within 50 years; the streets of Capetown were paved with Jarrah from WA with the forest cleared for sleepers and mines; cedar trees were felled and not replanted; 18 tonnes of earth are mined for one wedding ring; clearing trees from around creeks formed canals tearing the earth away rather than leaving billabongs to slow down the flow; only 1% of myalls in central west of NSW remain; there is a direct relationship between the loss of trees

and reduced rainfall; only 5% of brigalow remains in NSW and Qld ... the list of facts provided by Watson is astonishing.

There is still some hope proffered by the author. Native species may be able to compete with introduced weed as they are better adapted to Australian conditions, farmers are now planting mallee to control salinity from loss of trees and a new generation is learning from previous mistakes. Watson captures the concept of the bush rather nicely with statements like "sentimentality is a native of the bush" and the bush has a "weird melancholy". The bush is a bundle of contradictions and we love it ... Watson deserves great praise for this publication.

Allen Davis

