

SINGABOUT

JUNE 2015

TAILS FROM THE PAST



The BMC Concert Party performed to an unusual audience at the Addison Road Community Centre "Tails from the Past" event.

Photo: Sharyn Mattern

A Poem From the Past

Recited by Ian Hamilton in *The Ballad of the Heathcote Bushwhackers*

Phantom Horseman of Cricket Pitch Ridge by John Meredith

The fire burnt up near the edge of the township,
But down in the gully we held it at bay -
'If the wind gets round to the west,' said Jack Barrie
'We must warn all the folk to get out of the way!'

So on Cricket Pitch Ridge six good watchers were posted,
(The fire crept on in the gully below
And the six men, they sat and watched and shivered
As a freezing south-easterly started to blow.

It was close on to midnight, the wind had grown colder,
When hoofbeats were heard on the chill mountain air,
And a queer ghostly voice set the echoes a-flying:
'Hollo-o-o! Hollo-o-o! Hollo-o-o! Are you there?'

'Over here!' yelled Jack Barrie; the horseman drew near
And a bundle of blankets he threw on the ground.
Then he wheeled his black mount and rode into the darkness,
Over the rocks without ever a sound.

'Who was it Jack?' asked Billy Fitzgerald.
'Don't know him,' says Barrie, 'D'you know him, Blue?'
Blue didn't know, nor did Locko, nor Loveday,
It seems he was someone that nobody knew.

But one thing we did know, his blankets were warm ones,
We wrapped them around us and watched through the night;
Then shouldered our knapsack-sprays, climbed down the gully
And battled the fire in the morning's pale light.

It was under control, just a few stumps to spray now,
The westerly wind was no more to be feared.
We left two men on duty, returned to the blankets,
But when we got back they had all disappeared!

If that horseman was real, then he carries my blessing;
I won't wish him wealth, or good fortune, or gold,
(For all my mates think he must have been ghostly)
Wherever he is, may he never go cold.

On 1 February 1999 folklorist John Meredith received a phone call from Pat Kennedy, who was writing a history of Heathcote. Pat wanted permission to include a poem that John had written back in 1961 about a big bushfire that had threatened the district. John had lost his copy and, when Pat was asked where he had found the poem he wished to include in his history, he told John, 'It's pasted on the back of the door of the Brigade's hut in Heathcote.'

Pat Kennedy quickly supplied John with a copy and in his introduction to the poem, titled *The Phantom Horseman of Cricket Pitch Ridge*, Pat wrote: ‘This particular fire was burning on a freezing cold night, somewhere between the Heathcote Oval and the old railway weir in 1952.’



The Sandy Hollow Line

The sun was blazing in the sky and waves of shimmering heat
Glared down on the railway cutting, we were half dead on our feet,
And the ganger stood on the bank of the cut and he snarled at the men below,
"You'd better keep them shovels full or all you cows 'll go.
I never saw such a useless mob, you'd make a feller sick,
As shovel men you're hopeless, and you're no good with the pick."
There were men in the gang who could belt him with a hand tied at the back
But he had power behind him and we dare not risk the sack.
So we took it all in silence, for this was the period when
We lived in the great depression and nothing was cheaper than men.

And we drove the shovels and swung the picks and cursed the choking dust;
We'd wives and hungry kids to feed so toil in the heat we must.
But still the ganger drove us on, we couldn't take much more;
We prayed for the day we'd get the chance to even up the score.
A man collapsed in the heat and dust, he was carried away to the side.
It didn't seem to matter if the poor chap lived or died.
But one of the government horses fell and died there in the dray,
They hitched two horses to him and they dragged the corpse away.

The ganger was a worried man and he said with a heavy sigh:
"It is a bloody terrible thing to see a good horse die.
There much too valuable to lose, they cost us quite a lot
And I think it is a wicked shame to work them while it's hot.
So we will take them to the creek and spell them in the shade,
You men must all knock off at once. Of course you won't be paid."

And so we plodded to our camps and it seemed to our weary brains,
We were no better than convicts, though we didn't wear the chains,
And in those drear depression days, we were unwanted men,
But we knew that when a war broke out, we'd all be heroes then.
And we'd be handed a rifle and forced to fight for the swine,
Who tortured us and starved us, on the Sandy Hollow Line.

Duke Tritton, 1937.

(Originally published in *Singabout* Vol 6 No 1, 1966)

Review: Too Many Bloody Songs About Shearers By Far! (Vol 1)

Chloë & Jason Roweth

With this new recording of songs, poems and prose about the shearing game, Chloë and Jason Roweth once again show their dedication to getting at the truth of material that has been extensively "folk processed". And they have done it brilliantly, supported by the work of Mark Gregory, Rob Willis and the people working on the National Library's *Trove* project.

It's hard to imagine in 2015 the scale of the wool industry in the hundred years spanning the turn of the twentieth century - the enormous wealth generated, the many thousands of shearers and others employed in extremely hard work in mostly very unpleasant conditions, the ups and downs of the industry and the emergence of unionism and labour politics. Shearers had plenty to sing about and plenty of time in the off season to write and share so there is a rich vein here to plunder.

The title of the CD is a quote from John Dengate, from his father Norm. It was Norm's reaction to John's discovery of Australian bush music through the BMC in the 1960s and his attempts to work them out on his guitar at home. While there are a lot of songs about shearers in the tradition, this recording proves that there is lots more to discover about them and those who wrote and sang them.

The Trove gets a credit for four of the songs on the recording including a discovery by Mark Gregory in the *Bacchus Marsh Express* of 1891 of *The Bare Belled Ewe* complete with attribution to a C. C. Eynesbury. This is the song that *Click Go The Shears* descended from - and that was previously believed to have emerged in the 1920s or 30s. Others come from the work of collectors with some interesting variants of songs better known in different versions. A fine example is *Wooyeo Ball*, the song that Bert Lloyd supposedly borrowed as the basis of the more well known *Euabalong Ball*.

All this is meticulously described in the booklet which is full of background on the project and the songs with some terrific photos as well. The only omission from it is the actual lyrics, but then it would have needed to be twice its 20 pages. The CD is worth getting just for that - even without the music!

There's so much to like about the performances and the production of the CD. Both Jason and Chloë's vocals are excellent as is their playing of over 10 different instruments. Bill Browne on the drums is an excellent accompanist, and there is support from John Harpley and Rob and Olya Willis. A fine selection of appropriate tunes adds to the songs and poems, again showing the Roweth's careful curation of a wealth of collected material.

It's worth singling out Chloë's beautiful voice in *Shearing, Shearing Shearing (Sweet Belle Mahone)* and *The Shearer's Lament*, while Jason's reading and accompaniment of Henry Lawson's *The Greenhand Rouseabout* is also a highlight. His recitation award at the 2015 National Folk Festival is well deserved. His delivery of *The Mad Shed Rep* gives me shudders - though it's not the performance but the thought of getting a death adder in your swag for insisting on an eight hour day. The final track blends *Springtime it Brings On The Shearing* with another Lawson poem, *The Shearers*, to find a depth of melancholy in a song I'd always felt to be on the happy side - especially as it was the first song I performed - for my granny at about age 9 or 10.

All in all there's plenty to enjoy in this "Vol 1". In fact the title amounts to outrageous false advertising; I could use a whole lot more bloody songs about shearers than just these measly 70 minutes and 16 tracks. Let's hope that we don't have to wait too long for the next ones to come along.

Order from: <http://www.rowethmusic.com.au/>

Chris Maltby