

BILL WANNAN'S
The Australian
Yarns Ballads Legends Traditions

ILLUSTRATED BY RON EDWARDS

CURREY, O'NEIL



FOREWORD

HERE, for the first time in book form, is a collection of Australian folklore—tales, sayings, customs and superstitions that have originated from amongst the Australian people. There is nothing here that is the creation of one man; this is the folklore of a people composed by the people themselves.

It is sometimes said that Australia is too young a country to have produced a folklore; that folk tales are the product of older countries where tales and sayings have gained the richness and sharp detail that emerges from constant repetition over centuries. It is true that the folklore of a young country does not feature knights who slay dragons or tales of battles where heroes clash, but their folk heroes are mighty men just the same.

The folklore of Australia has much in common with the folklore of America. In both countries the people's tales reflect a society cut loose from its roots. They emerged in a time of migration, of shifting populations, and they reflect the spirit of their day.

In Australia men pushed in from the coast in bullock drays, the tilted waggon. Families were scattered. Men met and swapped experiences over camp fires, in shearing sheds. Bullock waggons laden with wool crept over salt-bush plains. The bullockies ate together, camped together and boasted about their teams, their loads, their strength, their dogs. In lonely little halls bearded accordion players sent the settlers and their wives stamping over floors made slippery with candle grease. Men collected round the door to talk. They told tales to impress each other. In this young country a man was valued according to the number of post holes he could dig, the horses he could ride, the sheep he could shear. So, many of our folk tales had their origin in efforts to impress. The boasting story became the tall story and the tall story passed from man to man till it acquired a richness that established it as the creation of a people and not of an individual.

In mines, in cities where factories were beginning to pour their smoke over industrial suburbs, the English language of the emigrants and convicts began to be enriched by words born of conditions and experiences peculiar to Australia. Sayings created by city workers, by diggers of the first world war, by men of the last

war, by coal miners, shearers, cooks—these became part of our tongue, our heritage.

Most of this book, I feel, reflects an Australia that is passing. The teller-of-*tales* thrived in the days when amusements were confined to an annual race meeting and an occasional dance. Now that he is disappearing his tales and sayings would be lost to us were it not for the enthusiast who collects and preserves them.

Mr. Wannan is such an enthusiast. In the compilation of this book he has rendered valuable service to Australia. Here is a unique record of Australian folklore gathered by a man who, over the years, has listened, questioned, then written down the result of his searching for those sayings and tales that reflect the spirit of the Australian people.

ALAN MARSHALL.

PREFACE

THIS book, so far as I am aware, is a new kind of anthology—new, that is, in this country—based largely on the materials of Australian folklore. Through this collection of yarns, ballads, local allusions, legends and popular anecdotes, I have indicated some aspects of the character and traditions of the Australian people, taking shape in the years between the establishment of the first convict settlement in 1788 and the emergence of a nation at the end of the first world war.

Although the book is intended for the general reader—a pocket companion for the leisure hour—I hope it will be of use to the student of Australian history and to those writers, artists, and musicians among us who are concerned with the realities of their environment. Most of the factors that have made our people what they are to-day can be traced back to the period covered by this book. In these pages will be found not the detailed recital of historic events but the expression, in a variety of forms, of the attitude of ordinary men and women to the life around them and to the broad movements that were shaping their destinies and that they in turn were helping to mould.

Some of the material may at first sight appear irrelevant to the main theme—the striving of a people for democracy and nationhood. What can the yarns about bullockies, and the superstitions of bushmen contribute to this theme? The purpose of this book is to show the Australians of earlier generations “in the round”; as they saw themselves in their day-to-day occupations, in their leisure, in their social strivings. Their humour, their superstitious beliefs, the experiences that they have crystallised in a yarn or a saying, are of vital importance if the general picture is to have focus and clarity.

I know that many readers will be critical of what they may regard as indefensible omissions and shortcomings. This is inevitable when such a large canvas is attempted. Out of the vast amount of material collected over a score of years I had to make a choice of what I considered most representative within the limits of the space available. I had also to discard from this collection many items which, interesting and important as they are, could be regarded only as repetitions of material already selected.

My arrangement of the contents is designed to group the material according to folk-themes or motifs—popular heroes and hero-worship; yarn-spinning; superstitions; place-lore; phrases, sayings and local allusions; and finally, under the heading “Some Perspectives,” a number of tales and references alluding to the major traditions of the Australian people.

What emerges from this book will be for each individual reader to assess. For me, the materials taken as a whole give a many-sided picture of a great and lovable people, strong in its determination to win a true democracy, quick to sense the humour in a situation however unpromising, firm in its belief in mateship and irreverent towards pompous, arrogant, unimaginative officialdom. Finest of all, perhaps, as the visiting American scholar, Mr. C. Hartley Grattan has noted, is its “aggressive insistence on the worth and unique importance of the common man.”

BILL WANNAN.

Melbourne, 1954.

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

THE need to publish a new edition of this book has given me the opportunity of making a number of revisions in the text. A few items have been excluded because, reading them over, I felt they were repetitious or unrepresentative or—in one instance—objectionable because of a sectarian bias.

Some new material has been added, but I have tried to keep intact the flavour of the book as it was first published. The many yarns, ballads, sayings and traditional stories that have come my way since the second edition of *The Australian* appeared, will go into new books I am at present working on. The first of these, titled *Tales From Back o' Bourke*, has now been published.

I want to thank the many readers who responded to the invitation, printed at the end of this book, to send me their comments and criticisms. It is always good for a writer to meet his readers, either personally or through correspondence. My knowledge of Australian folklore and of the Australian people has been immeasurably broadened by contacts of this kind.

It is good to see *The Australian* in a new format, and I welcome the drawings by Ron Edwards, one of the foremost of our younger book illustrators. To Ian Turner, who has patiently guided the three editions of this book through the press, I give sincere thanks. And to the equally patient editor of *Australasian Post*, who has given me an "open go" on the subject of Australian folklore week after week for the past two and a half years, I express my deep indebtedness.

B.W.

August, 1958

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY WARMEST thanks are due to the following, for permission to reprint copyrighted material:

Mrs. Mary Adamson for the lines, "The Toast of Honour," by her husband, the late Bartlett Adamson.

Messrs. Angus and Robertson Ltd., Sydney, for passages from the work of Henry Lawson and A. B. ("Banjo") Paterson and for "To Wagga-Wog-ah!" by Jack Moses, in his *Nine Miles from Gundagai*.

Mr. Sidney J. Baker and Messrs. Angus and Robertson Ltd., Sydney, for extracts from *The Australian Language*.

Dr. C. E. W. Bean for a passage on the Anzacs from *The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Allied Offensive, 1918*. Also to Dr. Bean and Messrs. Angus and Robertson for extracts from *On the Wool Track*.

Mr. Hugh Brady and Mr. Edwin Brady, and Messrs. Robertson and Mullens Ltd., Melbourne, for excerpts from *River Rovers* by the late E. J. Brady.

Messrs. Cassell and Company Ltd., Melbourne, for a passage from *The Sunlit Land* by Charles Barrett.

Mr. Warren Denning and The Australasian Publishing Company Pty. Ltd., Sydney, for the references to Fisher's Ghost from *The Road to Canberra*.

The Right Hon. H. V. Evatt and Messrs. Angus and Robertson Ltd., for the passage from *Australian Labour Leader*.

Dr. Charles Fenner and Georgian House Pty. Ltd., Melbourne for material from *Gathered Moss*.

The late Miss Miles Franklin and Messrs. Angus and Robertson Ltd. for the extract from *Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and his Book*.

Messrs. Georgian House Pty. Ltd. for a short anecdote from *Australian Son*, a biography of Ned Kelly, by Max Brown.

Mr. Edward Harrington and Messrs. Allan and Company Pty. Ltd., for "My Old Black Billy" from *The Kerrigan Boys and Other Australian Verses*.

The Herald and Weekly Times Ltd., Melbourne, and The Home Entertainment Library for passages from George E. Boxall's *History of the Australian Bushrangers*.

Mr. John Manifold and Messrs. Dennis Dobson Ltd., London, for "The Death of Ned Kelly," from *Selected Verse*.

Mrs. Bertha Lawson for two passages from *My Henry Lawson* (Frank Johnson, Sydney).

Mr. Vance Palmer and Melbourne University Press for the reference to Judge Higinbotham from *National Portraits*.

Messrs. Robertson and Mullens Ltd., Melbourne, for extracts from *A Shanty Entertainment* by E. S. Emerson, and two books by Fred J. Mills ("The Twinkler")—*Dinkum Oil* and *Square Dinkum*.

I have not been able to trace the authors or publishers of some of the material reprinted, and to these, as well as to any other individuals or firms whose rights may have been overlooked, I extend my sincere thanks and ask their forgiveness.

My thanks are due to many authors, anonymous and otherwise, to newspapers and to periodicals, quoted in the text, especially *The Bulletin* Sydney, which has been, perhaps, the foremost recorder of Australian folklore since 1880; and *Salt*, Australian Army journal.

*

A deep debt of gratitude is due to the following, who have given me most valuable help and advice in the preparation of this book:

My father, the late William F. Wannan, scholar and teacher, and my mother, Ruby Wannan, who first taught me to know and love the ballads, yarns and democratic traditions of our people.

Mrs. Lyndall Hadow, of Perth (W.A.), who introduced me to the writings of her father, the late Julian Stuart, one of the finest chroniclers of Australia's early trade union history and folklore. I am indebted to Mrs. Hadow for permission to reprint from Julian Stuart's work, and also for much information and constant encouragement.

Mr. Alan Marshall, of Melbourne, folklorist and friend, whose tales and articles are a particularly rich mine for the student of Australian life and lore.

Mr. John Manifold, of Brisbane, whose researches into our heritage of folk-song have added considerably to our knowledge of this field.

Mr. Les Barnes, Mr. Ian Turner, Mr. Stephen Murray-Smith, Mr. Hume Dow, Mr. Lance Loughrey, Mr. Judah Waten, and a great many others who researched and delved into their libraries, files and personal experience in order to make this a much fuller and better book than it would otherwise have been.

The Chief Librarians and staffs of the Public Library of Victoria and the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

To my wife, a special indebtedness, because she has endured not a few inconveniences in order that I might have time to speak and write about the folklore of the Australian people.

*

This book has resulted from the work of many people. Concerning the books I have consulted, reference is made in most instances throughout the text. I would particularly acknowledge the help I have received from *Old Bush Songs*, "Banjo" Paterson's fine collection, the basis on which all our subsequent ballad anthologies must rest. Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick's *The Australian People, 1788-1945*, and his *The British Empire in Australia, 1834-1939*; Mr. Sidney J. Baker's *The Australian Language*; Mr. Geoffrey C. Ingleton's collection of old Australian broadsheets, documents, etc., *True Patriots All*; the great work of Dr. Percy Jones in the field of our folk-song; Mr. Frank Clune's *Wild Colonial Boys*; *Australian Bush Songs and Ballads*, edited by Will Lawson—these have been a major source of help and of inspiration.

B.W.

EDITOR'S NOTE

I would appreciate hearing from readers who have comments and criticisms they may want to make about any aspect of this book.

I would also welcome information throwing additional light on the material included, and any Australian ballads, bush yarns, local legends, industrial lore, sayings and popular stories not appearing in this collection.

The importance of preserving our folklore cannot be too strongly stressed. Much of it that is of tremendous value to present and future historians, students, writers, musicians and artists will be lost if it is not soon put on permanent record. If sufficient material is forthcoming, it will be possible to eventually publish another collection—or even a series of volumes—similar to this.

BILL WANNAN

23 *Malvern Grove,*
Caulfield, Victoria.

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