

# PRESENTATION TO AUSTRALIAN FOLK NETWORK CONFERENCE, CANBERRA, 6 APRIL, 2023 (with Powerpoint)

## Giving Birth to *Waltzing Matilda*: A Forensic Analysis (SLIDE 1- Title)

History often concerns dates. (SLIDE 2- Two dates) Two dates are especially significant in the birth of a song you all know, “*Waltzing Matilda*”. They are 6 April and 18 June, of multiple years. My approach to both dates is ‘forensic’ – ie. evidence based.

Each of you will find some (SLIDE 3- Paterson’s lyrics) typed-up lyrics on your seat [Hold UP copy] which you can keep, but only if you help me finish this presentation by singing these original lyrics penned by ‘Banjo’ Paterson (SLIDE 4 – Title Page of *Diary/Notebook*, 1892). A solicitor at the time, he wrote them in a spare 1892 Legal Diary. It’s now held by the National Library of Australia, on display. Paterson used this Notebook committing his verse to paper, whenever he succumbed to his passion. I have a (HOLD UP FACSIMILE) facsimile available to view later if interested. On the rear side of the typed-up lyrics [Hold UP flip side] is a copy of Christina Macpherson’s original music, as written by her. I’ll return to her later.

**6 April is significant for 2 reasons- it is the AFN Conference day today and secondly,** If you were in Winton, Queensland, (SLIDE 5 - Advertisement for WM day, 2023) today is “**Waltzing Matilda Day**” and has been so since 2012. WM day is supposed to celebrate the day that it was first sung in public, at a banquet, at the North Gregory Hotel in Winton. Unfortunately, that date must be incorrect, as I propose to demonstrate. To discover how that mistake was made, it is useful to start with the primary source – Paterson’s Notebook.

When first penned in his Notebook, (SLIDE 6 - pic of Notebook's cover) Paterson didn't date it's composition. Nor can one glean the date from other verses found in the Notebook, including (SLIDE 7 - pic of index in Notebook) an Index to his first book, called 'The Man From Snowy River', published October, 1895. That Index was apparently sent (POINT) in "June, 1895". While, none of the material in the Notebook is dated some may be traced, due to their content, to his experience of outback Queensland eg. a verse on artesian waters.

Under a tab, "W", one finds this, the original lyrics to the song: (POINT) (SLIDE 8 – pic of original words in Notebook). We can be confident that this was the first iteration of WM because, as you can see, he has changed a few words (POINT), crossing out "rovin' Australia with me", preferring, on second thoughts, "Waltzing Matilda with me". The National Library holds (SLIDE 9- a later draft WM) another handwritten draft, written on a separate page and signed by Paterson. In that early, undated draft, Paterson changed a word or two – eg. 'voice for ghost'- the folk process in action, albeit by the original author.

Why was the 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1895 chosen as the day it was first performed in public? We can trace the fault to one Sydney May. In 1944, almost 50 years after the song was written, Sydney May spoke to various informants, some quite old, (SLIDE 10 - cover of S. May's book) and published, "The Story of Waltzing Matilda" (HOLD UP May's Book). By then, both Paterson and Macpherson has passed away. After all his interviews, Sydney May calculated the date the song was born by drawing on inaccurate, 2<sup>nd</sup> and third hand information gleaned some 50 years after the song was composed. Lawyers, and I confess to be one, cringe when confronted with hearsay dressed up as incontrovertible fact. One of May's informants (unspecified) produced for him a banquet 'Toast List' (SLIDE 11 - S.May, *The Story of Waltzing Matilda*, 1944, p.22, 29) and told him (ie. ancient hearsay) that (POINT) "It was at this banquet at the Post Office Hotel that *Waltzing Matilda* was first sung in public." The informant's source was not mentioned. So I went in search of the evidence - a forensic approach. As a sleuth, I love trove.com. 'The Queenslander' (SLIDE 12 - see *The Queenslander* , 13 April, 1895, p.713) reported a banquet was held in

Winton on **6 April, 1895**. But, that one was not held at the Post Office Hotel, but at Steeles Hotel, later called the North Gregory Hotel. Bingo - the hotel is confirmed by a contemporaneous report. The report also confirmed those named on the Toast List that May received were indeed present at that very banquet. But there is no report of any song, far less, WM, being sung on that occasion at all. Further research revealed that May's informant confused this occasion (**SLIDE 13 - see *The Western Champion*, 1 October, 1900. p.11** ) with another banquet which was held at the Post Office Hotel, on 29 September, 1900. On that occasion, it was reported Herbert Ramsay did sing *Waltzing Matilda* at a banquet held for the Qld Governor. He did not do so on 6 April, 1895, but 5 ½ years later.

Fast forward to 2012, when the WM Centre Board caste around the historical material for a date to celebrate "WM Day", it settled on today's date. Presumably, they reasoned Sydney May must be right - he had the Toast List after all!

Toast Lists aside, we can safely assume that WM was first sung in public sometime after it was composed; after it was born. To take a forensic approach as to when WM was in fact born, and then sung in public, allow me to turn the focus to evidence of Christina's travel movements (**SLIDE 14: *The Steamer Wodonga***) first by steamer, then rail and buggy. Then a 30 year old Christina, a sister, Jean and father, Ewen M'Pherson, together, departed Melbourne on the 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1895. They travelled first class on the *Wodonga* to northern ports, Sydney, Brisbane, Townsville. From Townsville, they would have taken the train to Hughendon. There they would have been picked up in a four-in-hand buggy driven by one of her three brothers, arriving at their sheep station, Dagworth, around 16 June, 1895. Enter, Sarah Riley, (**SLIDE 15 – Sarah RILEY**) Banjo's then fiancée of some 7 years' duration. She had arrived in Winton, a town about 100 km from Dagworth Station, a month earlier. Sarah Riley, attractive, 31 year old squatter's daughter, had invited Banjo (then a Sydney solicitor) to her brother's sheep station, Vindex, just south of Winton. Serendipitously, in August, 1895, Christina met her old school-friend, Sarah and, the newly arrived, Banjo, in Winton. The three travelled with Christina's brother, Bob, (**SLIDE 16 – Dagworth Station**) to Dagworth Station, where, on that veranda, in late August, 1895,

the song was composed- the words joined up with the music right there. On my calculation, that was 4 months after 6 April.

Sydney May's error citing this date has been repeated by subsequent commentators. All relied on ancient hearsay. None used trove. By filtering out the ancient hearsay, I have attempted a forensic history of *Waltzing Matilda*, based on evidence, not on fertile imaginings or fictitious invention. In that category are those who claim the song to be an allegory of the shearer's strike in 1894; and who go on to attribute names to the characters in the song. Their conclusions, I have argued, just don't bear scrutiny.

That said, there is something of a distinctive quality of Aussie humour as the town of Winton persists in annually celebrating the first public performance of a song on a date 4 months before it was written.

(SLIDE 17- Bronze plaque, stating 6 April, 1895, on plinth) Perpetuating the incorrect date (**POINT**) of its first public performance is a brass plaque on a plinth upon which a life-size bronze Banjo Paterson stands outside the WM Centre to this day. Notwithstanding that, I say "Long live *Waltzing Matilda* day" on 6<sup>th</sup> April, every year.

### **18 June is significant for 3 reasons –**

1. Sydney May did, in fact, speak personally to one of the first ear-witnesses to the song, namely Marie Riley (SLIDE 18 – Marie Riley, tea, Winton house) who was married to Sarah's brother Frederick. They hosted Banjo and Sarah in their house when the pair rendezvoused in Winton just before the trip to Dagworth Station. Then, after the party returned from Winton, with a song in its infancy, Marie hosted the entourage consisting of Sarah Riley, Banjo Paterson, Christina & Bob Macpherson. They were also joined by a local squatter, and renowned baritone, Herbert Ramsay, so said Sydney May. (May, pp.29 & 39). (**HOLD UP MAY's BOOK**). Marie Riley's modest house boasted a piano, Christina's instrument of choice, and she was drawn to it like a magnet. The perfect host, Marie Riley put on afternoon tea for, she assumed

to be, travel weary guests (May p.19). With Christina at the piano, they sang over and over again the newly crafted song. This could be considered a private practice but not yet a public performance. The first public performance, I suggest, came about later that day in August, 1895, when Marie Riley became fed up with the persistent, noisy and irrepressible singing. She was agitated for 2 good reasons - (i) the afternoon tea she had catered for the homecoming/return party got cold, but, perhaps more importantly, (ii) to Marie's newborn daughter, Phyllis, this cacophony was certainly no lullaby...she just wouldn't settle, so the entire party (Paterson, Christina and Bob Macpherson, H. Ramsay) were dispatched to the North Gregory Hotel "as many of the party were staying there" (S. May, p.40) to sing to their heart's content. [SLIDE – 19 – Winton Cemetery] The restless, newborn, Phyllis, was but 9 weeks old, born in Winton on 18<sup>th</sup> June, 1895. That's the first reason why the 18<sup>th</sup> June, in 1895 has significance for the song. Notably, not a single commentator on the birth of WM, including Sydney May, and many others since, none have realised that a nine week baby was one of the first ear-witnesses to the song; (SLIDE 20 – North Gregory Hotel, 1895) and that she was probably responsible for the first public performance, sung to the Winton locals, at the piano of the North Gregory Hotel.

2. The second significance of the date, 18 June, 1864: is that it is the birth date of Christina Macpherson (SLIDE 21 - Christina Macpherson, b & d.). On the historical material available, she was the inspiration for the lyrics. Upon hearing her rendition of "Craigielea", an old Scottish tune (or a variation as she remembered it) (HOLD UP AUTOHARP) first played on an autoharp, Banjo asked her if she knew the words to it. She did not. (SLIDE 22 - A.B. Banjo Paterson) And so Paterson, the wordsmith, the sometime collaborator and the dashing, professional, son of a Scot, who was 'single' - well sort of single - a man of 31 years responded to this attractive, single, talented, Scottish squatter's daughter, by penning some whimsical lyrics, (SLIDE 23 – original tune by Christina Macpherson) to accompany Christina's tune. Christina had just weeks earlier turned 31 herself- a most eligible age.

Fetching his Notebook, he took up his fountain pen and commenced to impress (SLIDE 24 - Original lyrics to WM) first, in a clear and legible script for the first line (POINT to 1<sup>st</sup> line). His excitement intensified as the verse unfolded, as his pen hurried across the page, in a vain attempt to keep up with spontaneous excitement. As his story developed, his script deteriorated. Linguistically, he was drawn to the surrounding Queensland vernacular – jumbucks and billabongs, swagmen and tuckerbags...and waltzing matilda. With the rush of blood, he neglected to include a title. Although it was drafted under the letter “W”.

So, with a glint in his eye and an inclination for sardonic humour, as the lyrics progressed, the messier his script became (POINTS). In the story-telling, Paterson created for himself the opportunity, in the first and second chorus, to invite his musical muse, to travel away with him by, not too subtly, asking her a rhetorical question (or was it literal?) in the first chorus, (POINTS) “Who’ll come a Waltzing Matilda, my darling?”, Who’ll come a Waltzing Matilda with me?...” and answering it, as an ode to Christina, in the second chorus: (POINTS) “You’ll come a Waltzing Matilda my Darling, you’ll come a Waltzing Matilda with me.” So Christina was not only the inspiration for the lyrics but deserves full credit as the collaborator, having provided the music - without her there would be no *Waltzing Matilda*. (Meanwhile, Sarah Riley, on the outer, was livid, the 7 year engagement kaput).

A century later, in 1995, (SLIDE 25 - before construction), Winton Council hatched the plan to build a monument, a \$3.3 million building dedicated to the song. It was to be the “Waltzing Matilda Cultural Centre” It opened on easter Saturday, 18 April, 1998. (SLIDE 26 - first Waltzing Matilda Centre). It quickly became a magnet for tourists - a great advertisement for the town, and an economic boon. The monument even boasted a (POINT) life-size bronze of “Banjo” Paterson standing high on a plinth in front, silently welcoming visitors. But the inspiration and collaborator was, and to this day remains, absent; missing; forgotten. Was it because the musician was an unpublished woman perhaps, a woman devoid of public acclaim?

3. 151 years to the day after her birth, on the 18 June, 2015, Christina Macpherson's ghost may be heard, (SLIDE 27 - FIRE) when an electrical fault (so they say) caused the Waltzing Matilda Centre to burn to the ground. On the anniversary of her birth, the building lay in cinders (SLIDE 28 – debris). But the bronze Paterson (SLIDE 29 - Firemen & Bronze Banjo) survived intact. Winton's residents wept, then regrouped. Now, the Waltzing Matilda Centre has been rebuilt, bigger and better, with government grants of some \$20 million dollars. The new (SLIDE 30 - New WM CENTRE) Centre was officially opened on 20 April, 2018. The bronze Paterson still adorns the entrance, alone. (SLIDE 31 – Me & my son, Seb; & Me with the Bronze Banjo outside New WM Centre). Some say Christina's ghost was heard on 18 June 2015. Today, the Centre still awaits a bronze of Christina Macpherson to stand alongside 'The Banjo' welcoming visitors to the monument of Australia's most recorded song, having accumulated over 1,500 versions. May I finish by asking this rhetorical question- Isn't it about time that the musical collaborator and undisputed inspiration be properly represented, in bronze, standing alongside 'The Banjo' at the WM Centre, wouldn't you agree?

Finally, (SLIDE 32 – The Typed words) let's sing the original version, in all its whimsical/cheeky humour, and sing, publicly for the very first time as far as I know, Paterson's ungrammatical, quirky and comedic last word "we" (POINT) where it appears once in the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse and twice in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chorus of the song, as first penned in his 1892 Notebook. As a tribute to Dennis O'Keeffe, singer, songwriter, who, for decades, led the Australian traditional song sessions at the National Folk Festival in the session bar right below us here; O'Keeffe will sing Banjo's original words to a tune, resembling that notated by Christina. Before we begin, let's have a listen to O'Keeffe's slower, romantic style and rhythm. Lets give it a go, taking guidance from the first verse and first chorus sung by Denis O'Keeffe (SLIDE 33- audio for 1min 2 secs).

[When O'Keeffe's version finishes, after 1 min. 2 secs, go to: (SLIDE 34 - Cover of my BOOK)]



[BRUCE on autoharp, fingerpicks and music/chords on stand.]

I'll now invite Bruce Watson, singer, songwriter and autoharpist extraordinaire, to accompany us on Christina's autoharp. We are now on the veranda of Dagworth station in the outback with the blazing sun setting on the horizon. On the Count of 4: 1,2,3,4.

[Audience sings original WM with Bruce Watson on autoharp – 4 mins 30secs]

I'll now take any questions. I also have copies of my book available afterwards at the back.