

Vale Brian Dunnett

Mark Gregory

I first met Brian in the 1960s when I called into 40 Market Street, Sydney, which was a large terrace house that was the headquarters of the Eureka Youth League and the Communist Party of Australia and had a bookshop on the ground floor. Brian was at the time Secretary of the EYL.

I caught up with Brian again in the 1980s when I was working as a technician at Macquarie University and he was convener of a shop floor committee at the railway workshops in Chullora. He and his committee were involved with the 'Art in Working Life Project' the funding of which came through the Australia Council.

Among other things railway workers became involved in a number of projects, one of which employed a resident poet to encourage workers to compose their own verse. The poet was Harry Robertson, a Rolls Royce trained Glaswegian ships engineer whose songs I knew well.

Other initiatives of the Combined Railway Unions Cultural Committee included an exhibition of thirty large illustrated panels reflecting Australian railway history through the eyes of railway workers themselves. These panels were exhibited in a railway carriage that travelled to railway stations across the country. In 1982 a meeting took place at Chullora with Don Mamouny, Dallas Lewis and Pat Cranney from Sidetrack Theatre and shop stewards from the Loco area.

The idea of a theatre company residence is proposed and agreed to in principle and Sidetrack successfully applied for the funding. In 1987 there was also a lunchtime concert launch at Chullora for the release of a 45rpm recording of two songs composed and performed by railway workers Ray King and Ron Russell.

Brian soon roped me into his project of recording and publishing the railway song and poetry he'd been researching and collecting, the result of which was two cassette tapes — 'Railway Voices' and 'Trains of Treasure'. These were released in 1984 and later reissued as CDs. This project was launched in Sydney by Roger Woodward and Donal Horne. As well as railway workers and their unions these projects involved more than a hundred artists, poets, singers, voices, researchers and radio producers.

Over the next thirty or so years we worked together to gather many more railway songs and poems and making them accessible on internet archives like 'Australian Railway Songs' at railwaysongs.blogspot.com where there are now close to 500 lyrical items as well as over 130 articles from over 100 different Australian newspapers. This online blog also contains 18 chapters written by Brian under the title 'The Australian Railway Story' and awaiting editorial hands for future publication, a big part of his dream.

Just as Brian roped me into his projects I was pleased to rope his whole workshop into one of mine. At Macquarie University I was working as technical support with Barbara Dodd on a speech therapy research project titled the 'Eye-hear' project which required among other things testing the hearing of workers subjected to working in noisy environments. A railway workshop was a good example and the Chullora workers committee agreed that a large number of free hearing tests would be offered to the workers.

Another project Brian helped me with was to provide the Sydney May Day March with a multicultural broadcast of workers songs from around the world. It was a project that a Sydney waterside worker had suggested to 2SER's *Razors Edge* — the wharfie envisaged everyone on the march carrying portable radios playing the songs as they marched. Instead of that the May Day Committee organised four loud speaker vans that were tuned in to the hour long radio broadcast starting with the old French workers' anthem 'The International'.

I reckon it was the first radio-controlled May Day in the world! A visiting delegate to the May Day march listened in amazement to the broadcast in the taxi to catch his plane home when he heard a Tagalog version of a song that was recorded in Manila on one of the huge anti-Marcos demonstrations. The song was 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated' espousing an attitude Brian embraced to the full.

Brian certainly never stopped working on and thinking about his chosen task of preserving the cultural achievements of Australian railway workers.

In 2005 Brian and UNE academic Andrew Piper prepared *Train Whistle Blowing*, a booklet of songs and poems as a souvenir for the National Railway Heritage Conference held as part of events associated with the 150th anniversary of the beginning of steam railways in NSW.

In 2009 the Bush Music Club published a collection of thirty songs from Brian's collection, complete with music notation, under the title *Australian Train Songs*.

In 2013 Brian and the Illawarra Folk Festival proposed and helped organise more than 400 people to take advantage of the Green Music Train as a great musical initiative which is supported by one of the festival's sponsors City Rail.

Brian commented on the significance of his Green Music Train concept:

One of the strengths of our project has been the involvement of Australian Culture bodies like the Australia Council and the National Folk Movement. This has meant that the traditional Railway songs, poems and stories of Australian Railway continue to be performed at folk music and steam festivals.

*

*

*

Tweed and Lismore

Ned McEllisot (1893)

I am a navvy that's worked everywhere,
East, west, north and south I vow and declare,
Such terrible misfortune I ne'er had before,
As we had on that railway, the Tweed and Lismore.

Chorus

Laddie Fol the Diddle eril Ol, eril Ol aye.

Now me and Bill Lally came up from the South
To see if we could get some cuts to take out
Old Kerril he promised us cuttings galore
By the side of that railway, the Tweed and Lismore.

When we came to Bexhill 'twas on a fine day
No money, no marbles nor nothin' to pay.
It came on to rain, and we lay on the floor,
By the side of that Railway, the Tweed and Lismore.

It came on to rain and it rained with a will
The flood nearly covered the whole of Bexhill,
Such shiftin' of camp sure I ne'er saw before,
As we had on that Railway, the Tweed and Lismore.

I first got a job with an axe in me hand
From lopping and chopping I scarcely could stand,
Me bones they did ache and me arms they were sore
From working like blazes upon the Lismore.

I next got a job with me horses and drays
The chaff it was dear boys, as so was the maize.
Two and sixpence a day they would give and no more
And they run us to the devil upon the Lismore.

If one thing was in it our credit ran high,
If not then I'm sure that all luck might have died.
The people from Queensland come down be the score,
Seeking work on that railway, the Tweed and Lismore.

Our little 'Timie' was Brady by name,
Of stature he's small and I'm tellin' you plain.
Of stature he's small, and of cheek he's galore
And he'd sack you for smoking upon the Lismore.

And now to conclude and to finish my song
Mr McNeilly is big, fat and strong.
While old Andy Morgan's a man to the core
And Kerril himself he's a rotten old Bore.

*

*

Editorial Note

This industrial rail song, written by Ned McEllisot in 1893, was sent to Ron Edwards by Richmond River Historical Society, with a note stating that it was composed by Ned McEllisot, late of Bagotville. A copy was then printed in Ron Edwards' *Big Book of 1976 Australian Songs*.

MG