

## Oral Literature

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*Bill Scott*

I have been asked to comment upon bush yarns, probably because, as a folklorist, I have been involved in the recording and study of this part of our traditional culture, and have published a collection of such material.

Before beginning to examine the yarns, however, perhaps we might take a quick look at the stereotype bushman as he exists in the popular imagination of much of the population of our country and compare the actuality with the legend.

It is a remarkable thing about stereotypes that they often bear little resemblance to the things they are supposed to represent. One example is that branch of writing called science fiction. The popular image, fostered by moving pictures is that science fiction deals with monsters wishing to eat people or conquer the Universe! The devotee of true imaginative writing tends to snarl at people who present this image; knowing as he does of the thoughtfulness of Clifford Simak, the prose poetry of Roger Zelazny, the imaginative inventiveness of Zenna Henderson, Cordwainer Smith and Ursula le Guin and the so-called 'hard' science writing of such people as Isaac Asimov, Arthur Clarke and the early Robert Heinlein.

The same mistaken stereotyping occurs with nationalities. All over the world when people think of the United States of America they tend to remember cowboys. For many folk the typical American is the hard-eyed man in leather chaps with a Colt revolver slung on his thigh. Of course this image is quite wrong. Cowboys, as misrepresented in so many novels and movies existed in that form for only a few decades, and certainly not in such fashion or numbers as would deserve the enormous amount of attention they have received. Yet the cowboy is all too often the image of an American which springs to mind when archetypal persons are mentioned.

Something of the same misconception exists about the inhabitants of our country. All too often the image of the locals is that of a lean, weatherbeaten, taciturn individual with a horse and a stockwhip

not too far away. This image, which has taken something of a thrashing from irritated urban writers in the past fifty years, remains today in popular fancy.

Of course, all these popular images are wrong and will not stand up under logical examination, but they do exist, and, I suspect, will continue to do so.

In the past ten years popular imagination has tended to romanticise the image of the bushman in the early days of our society. Recently I have even been hearing a song which has as the last line of the refrain: "The swaggies will all waltz Matilda again.", as though carrying a swag in search of work was a romantic, interesting and even enjoyable thing. Certainly the men who were compelled by circumstances to do so seem to have assumed a romantic aura in public imagination.

My own experience as an itinerant worker in the comparatively good times of the late 1940s taught me that while there was a certain amount of freedom and independence in such a life and that without such men the economy of the country at that time would never have prospered as it did, nevertheless the life itself was almost always hard, uncomfortable and laborious. I would suggest that the leanness of the popular image was caused by poor, unsuitable and insufficient food, the weatherbeaten look was certainly true but acquired the hard way, and the taciturnity might be ascribed to a person having reached the stage of exasperation where they discovered that blasphemy and obscenity did not meet the needs of the situation -- so they said nothing!

So, while there is some truth in the popular conception of a bushman's appearance, little thought seems to have been given to how he got to look that way! Of course the bushman is still around. Living as I do in a country town I pass him every day in the street. He is a small part of the total population of Australia, but he is there and he will continue. If the urban population chooses to fantasize that these men represent typical Australians, well; they are as typical of ourselves as the cowboy is a true representative of the American people or the bug-eyed monster is truly representative of the many subjects of science fiction.

The point I wish to make is that during the final three decades of the nineteenth century these men had an effect upon literary form in our country which I don't think has been sufficiently acknowledged or commented upon by students. In effect, and like the Aboriginal people, so many of whose ways they adopted, they developed a great body of orally transmitted literature which, while it served the primary purpose of all literature, that of entertainment, also served in many other ways in the restless, nomadic community in which it was developed. Later we shall look at some of these other aspects, but for the present, let us consider the entertainment factor alone.

In a society which varied from total illiteracy to containing graduates from English universities, storytelling, (or 'raconteuring', if you prefer the twenty-dollar word), reached a degree of skill not seen before or since in this country. One might cite Joseph Furphy as the best recorder of such activities in his book *Such is Life*. The conversation he allegedly records in the first section of his book as taking place around a campfire between the bullockies, swagmen and travellers is undoubtedly true to life if perhaps gilded a little by his skill as a writer. In the days when books were so few and costly and the possibility of city amenities for entertainment were so few it is not surprising perhaps that men found their own entertainment. Not everyone possessed the vocal skills needed for song, few men played upon any musical instrument save those small enough to be easily carried, like the penny whistle, flute or concertina. The result was a flowering of storytelling skills in a society where all present during leisure moments were expected to make some contribution to the entertainment of the assembly.

In his poem *They'll Tell You About Me*, Ian Mudie says: (in part),

"It was me boiled my billy under the coolibah,  
told the bloke in the flash car to open his own flamin'  
gates, wanted to know, "Who's robbing this coach, you  
or Ned Kelly?"

Had the dog sit on my tuckerbox outside of Gundagai  
and gave Henry Lawson the plots to make his stories  
from..."

Lawson, in his article on *Mateship*, remarks: "They used to say I was influenced by (the writings of) Bret Harte. I hope so!"

The fact is that both Lawson and Bret Harte spent many of their formative years living and working with rough men in isolated country and on goldfields. Both, in their youth, had been exposed to the great, unrecorded oral literature of their times and both adopted the laconic, direct style of narration common to unlettered men when the time came for them to put their stories on to the printed page. When one considers the ornate literary style common and so admired in Victorian times, this break from current style is even more remarkable. The same is true to a degree of their great contemporary Mark Twain, who also used the simple direct narrative style with telling effect.

As anyone will know who has tried to tape-record spoken stories from informants there are many degrees of skill in the art of raconteuring. At its worst one hears the storyteller conduct an argument with himself while the story becomes lost in a sea of irrelevancies. When a true artist is encountered the tale flows freely from beginning to end. Here is an example of such a storyteller's art:

"My father used to tell me about this old convict fellow. He was an old lag from England. He'd been flogged across his back and he had scars across his back. Well, him and his wife had a bit of a farm there. He put in a crop of corn. When the corn was ready to pick, his wife died. He wouldn't knock off to bury her, he wanted to get the corn in. Anyway, he had her laying there, you know, and he'd go home of a night, and the corpse was there, and he'd get into bed this side, and lay there, and get up in the morning and go to work.

"Anyway, the neighbours went in and they got the police, and the police came out and they made him bury her. Of course, in those days you just dug a hole in the paddock. I said to Dad, "By gee, he must have been a hard man!" But they reckoned he'd had that hard a life that he wouldn't have any consideration for anyone. You see, he'd had that much himself, flogged over the back with a cat of nine tails. But it'd be a terrible way to be, wouldn't it?"

Now, the man who told me that story was very old and it was quite obvious that he believed the tale to be true. God knows it might have been, his father had settled in the country near Goulburn in New South Wales early enough to have witnessed an encounter between the Ben Hall gang of bushrangers and some squatters they unsuccessfully tried to rob. It's quite possible that such an event did occur

and that it became part of the unwritten history of the district, to be told to new generations as part of the lore of their own particular area.

If you consider this tale which was told with the skill and polish and terseness of many repetitions you immediately realise that here is the bare skeleton of a story fit for the pen of a Barbara Baynton or Henry Lawson. Here is a tale of a man so brutalised by his fellows and the system of punishment he had undergone that he was lost to all but his personal priorities. We can understand his attitude although perhaps we could never agree with it. You will notice that the storyteller shared this understanding, but he also shares our regret at what had happened to the man. The concluding sentence "But it'd be a terrible way to be, wouldn't it?" sums it all up with great economy.

If one pictures the child Lawson hearing such tales one begins to appreciate the truth of the statement in Mudie's poem: "and gave Henry Lawson the plots to make his stories from..." Certainly in Lawson's writing there are many examples of tales still current among oral storytellers and which occasionally still make the newspapers as news items. Recently I had a clipping from an American newspaper sent to me. It came from the State of Montana. It told of two hunters driving into the mountains which give the State its name in the latest model Land Rover, the pride of its owner's heart. While driving along they took a shot at a coyote, which fell. Pulling up the vehicle they examined the animal and discovered it was merely stunned. For a joke they tied two sticks of dynamite to its back; and when it regained consciousness, lit the fuse and ran. The coyote ran beneath the new car and exploded there, thus completing the tale which Lawson had written down so many years ago in his story *The Loaded Dog*.

The point I am making is that there is in existence a very large body of tales which are almost exclusively oral in nature, are rarely written down but which nevertheless can be a rich source for the more formal writer. The simple, direct, often colourful narration has in the past had its effect upon literary method and style and will continue to do so unless this method of entertainment is utterly discarded, smothered under a load of multi-coloured, predictable pap from the nonsense-vomiting chatterbox in the corner of every living-room.

Yarnspinning played a very important part in the recreational lives of our forbears. The habit is continually mentioned in the ballad poetry which was so popular for so long in our country and which remains such a strong though mostly unacknowledged pattern among country versifiers. The ballad poem, is, after all, usually only a story set to rhyme for ease in recollection and retelling to a fresh audience. Oglivie, in one of his ballads speaks of: "The wondrous tales that gild the road from Normanton to Bourke..."

The anonymous bard who composed the words of 'The New Chum's First Trip' says:

*"Now, I'd heard many tales of the life of a drover,  
His fancy whip-handle and his jingling quart-pot;  
Of smoking and yarning at night round the campfire -  
There's many would say, "What a life he has got!"*

The custom of yarning, of storytelling, was not confined to drovers or even to this country. In shearing sheds, bars, in the fo'c'sles of sailing ships and around the fires of the goldfields the stories were told and retold, polished and re-polished, until they came to form a largely unrecorded body of international literature. Many great writers drew unashamedly upon this rich source. Kipling, for instance, freely admits this in his ballad *When Homer Smote His Bloomin' Lyre*. John Steinbeck listened to the storytellers among the people and profited immensely from it, as he admits in his book *Travels With Charlie*. Those lucky ones among you who may have encountered the classic first novel of the American West, *The Log Of a Cowboy* by Andy Adams will recognise that any of the men who made the great trail drive he describes from Mexico to the Canadian border could have been dropped into any Australian droving camp and immediately recognised some of the lies being told there.

As well as being a repository for traditional jokes and stories, the tradition of storytelling had other and very practical functions, as Ron Edwards has pointed out in his essay on the Australian yarn. The practice could be used by any newcomer to an established group in a yarning session to convey information about himself in a way that his new comrades would not categorise as boasting, a trait of character which would meet with instant rejection if done openly. Two instances Ron quotes come immediately to mind: He tells of a newcomer to one group who, when discussion revolved around a

past incident, remarked, "Yes, I remember that, I was playing in the Brother's team then ..." By making this apparently artless statement he had informed the rest of the group that he is a footballer and a Roman Catholic. Ron also instances an occasion when a man was being irritated by another member of the group who remarked, at the beginning of a yarn, "I was doing a bit of wrestling for Jimmy Sharman's troupe ..." thus indirectly telling the nuisance that he was not to be trifled with. In both these instances these men could not be accused of boasting yet each had managed to convey information about themselves.

One should not overestimate the powers of observation of such groups, however. This conversation was reported to me as having occurred in a bar in Mount Isa about twelve years ago by someone who heard a desultory conversation taking place in the group beside him.

One member, obviously politically aware, said: "I see Gough Whitlam got the sack." To which another member said, "Who's Gough Whitlam?"

"He was Prime Minister." There was a moment's silence, then a third member asked, "Whatever happened to Menzies?"

"Him? He drowned, didn't he?" and then the conversation turned to the chances of a local football team.

One should also bear in mind that yarning in such places as public bars often involves a knowledge of Australian language, which is not English at all. Another friend of mine, this time in a bar at Annerley in Brisbane, overheard the following, which would be unintelligible to anyone not Australian:

"You shoulda been here last night. Two wogs bunged on a blue. One of them got into holts with a young lair from Inala but his china wouldn't back him so he went the knuckle on his mate!"

There is the basis for a short story in that concise relation of an actual incident provided the writer had the skill and imagination and background knowledge of the Australian psyche needed to

envelop the bare bones of the incident with the apparatus of artistic expression. No doubt Henry Lawson could have done so, or Bret Harte, or Louis Becke or that now neglected master of the short story, R.S. Porteous. In the meantime, heartbreak and laughter continue to be recorded and to flourish in the great, largely uninvestigated oral literature of our land. Here is an example of this kind of succinct relating of an incident by a man who has never tried to write a story in his life yet who has developed a style of expressive delivery and elimination of non-essentials that takes one to the heart of the incident as the tale unfolds. This man was a locomotive driver with the Queensland Railways and the incident described actually happened. Here is the oral story teller at his best, it is typed exactly as he told it to me on his front verandah under Mount Berserker in Rockhampton in 1980:

"We picked up this stock train at Julia Creek. Now, they were Territory stuff, big beasts; they could look out the top of the cattle wagon without any difficulty whatsoever. The two drovers had an awful lot of trouble with them all the way down. There was this one wagon, they had two bullocks that kept going down at one end of the wagon, and when they pushed the others back to the far end of the wagon to get these two up, there was another one would go down. They were just sulking so they eventually roped them up by the horns. They were sulky, they weren't weak.

"By the time we got to Richmond it was ten o'clock at night, black dark, there's no electricity. This other fellow's down, his eyeballs rolled right back, he won't get up. So they decided to unload the wagon and get him out and then reload. That's to give the others more room and this old fellow could spell for a few days and come on later.

"Well, we shunted to the crush and we got all the others out but this old bloke, he couldn't get up. So we shunted back to the ramp. There's a post there they used to drag the dead beasts out. So they put a rope round his horns and we moved the train to drag him to the door of the wagon, then the Guard and the fireman and I all got



down and we helped to get this old bull out on to the ground in the yard.

"We got him down and untied him and we thought he was near dead but we hardly got back on the loco when he came to life. The Guard saw him first because he charged him. The Guard was the only one had a light. He yelled and chucked the lamp in the air. The drovers run up the sides of the crush like goannas. The Guard run for the far side and went to climb but the bottom rail was missing and the bull ran all over him. He yelled again and the bull soared over the fence like a bird and vanished off across the town common. The drovers had to ring up the local agent and tell him there was a bullock branded so-and-so on the common, and to sell him to the local butcher. Then we loaded up the rest again and off we went. The Guard was black and blue!"

There is no doubt that this yarn has a plot that, as Mudie says, "Henry Lawson could have made a story from".

Will this succinct direct type of narrative continue to flourish in our society? Can it continue in city and suburb among the myriad diversions and entertainments offered by electronic society? It has been my observation as a folklorist trying to record some of these tales that usually, the more elderly the informant then the more fluent is the storytelling. They possess great skill in constructing and relating their tales. That is, if they had such skills in the first place. Some informants remain almost incomprehensible in their ramblings, but this may be either because of senility or else because they had no narrative skill in the first place, and have never acquired any. Possibly the oral telling of tales is a dying art. From experience, younger people lack the verbal skills exhibited by their elders. Perhaps they do not need to communicate for entertainment.

It is another error to think that this talent for oral entertainment is uniquely a country or 'bush' skill. Every trade, factory, common-room or sporting activity has in the past developed its own traditional set of tales which are welcomed by the newcomer as being new to his or her experience though they appear stale to those who have been familiar with them for many years.

Oral stories never die if they are truly entertaining. A special study of what are in these days described as 'urban legends' shows that some stories of remote origin continue to be published as fact in newspapers around the world. They become absorbed into literature from time to time but may be then forgotten to re-emerge after a new generation has arisen to which they are unfamiliar. Perhaps we should not classify them too closely into 'bush' or 'urban' stories but speak simply of tales which exist, have existed for generations and will continue while there are voices to speak and ears to hear.

Let me conclude by telling something of the history of such a tale which demonstrates that a good story never dies so long as there are fresh listeners. I am quite sure that Henry Lawson would have fallen upon it with cries of joy had he ever heard it. As it is, it is quite close in some respects to one of his I have mentioned already.

The following cutting was sent to me by Nancy Keesing from the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 31st August, 1988, I Quote:

#### COCKROACH STORY TRUE SAYS ISRAELI NEWSPAPER

*Jerusalem, Tuesday*

The *Jerusalem Post* said today it would retract a story about an Israeli housewife's battle with a cockroach which landed her husband in hospital, despite questions about its authenticity. Foreign news agencies which quoted the paper last Thursday challenged the report after suggestions that it sounded remarkably similar to stories previously published elsewhere. Asked if the paper stood by its story after checks, the editor, Mr. Ari Rath, said, "We do not retract. This is my answer." He said most of the story had since been confirmed.

The item said a frightened wife threw a cockroach into the toilet and sprayed insecticide on it when it refused to die. It is said that later her husband dropped a cigarette butt into the toilet igniting the fumes and seriously burning his private parts. The story said that ambulance men, shaking with laughter at the incident, dropped the man's stretcher as they carried him downstairs. The newspaper said he was taken to hospital with burns, a broken pelvis and broken ribs.

Now, as a child in the little town of Caboolture in the early 1930s I had heard the following tale which spread with astonishing swiftness by the 'bush telegraph':

In those days in the country many toilets were of the 'Chick Sale' type - small dunny erected over a deep pit dug in the earth. About once a fortnight it was the custom to tip some kerosene into the pit. The yardman at one of the pubs used to do so. The story that flashed like electricity around our small community was that the yardman had mistakenly tipped petrol instead of kerosene while doing his fortnightly duty and of course, someone dropped a butt . . . . . Numbers of the towns least-liked identities were identified as being the victim, and despite their denials and protests the story lingered on to become part of the folklore of our community.

What a joy for me to discover it again after so many years, updated in technology and reaching the world from Jerusalem. Not only was it the same old tale but it had by now acquired part of another such legend about ambulance bearers dropping a stretcher laughing at the circumstances of the accident they had been called to attend.

The Israeli newspaper later admitted that the story was not true; but in the meantime it had been picked up and reprinted in many other journals around the world. Almost certainly someone will write a story about such an incident, I thought.

Since that time I have had the story confirmed as being part of the great body of oral international literature of our times. Ron Edwards wrote to let me know that he had heard a version from an informant who alleged it to be a true incident which occurred at an Army camp during the second World War; and I have discovered much the same tale in Hesba Brinsmead's novel *The Story of Benny Perhaps* as happening on an opal field in remote western Queensland. No doubt it is elsewhere.

As I said, a good story remains entertaining whether in Caboolture or Jerusalem, in an Army camp or on the opal fields. I am sure that one will go happily on in the great literature of the tradition along with its many companions, just as I am sure that writers will continue to mine the tradition for good background material for their literary efforts.



