

*Australia's Lost Folk Songs: The Treasures
that Slipped Through Percy Jones' Fingers,
A Review**

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[Ed. We take the unusual course of an advance/initial response to this volume, prior to its official release, so that it may be noted alongside our obituary for this doyen of collectors and publishers of Australian folk song, music and other traditional and cultural materials.]

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[Australian Folklore Occasional Paper No. 25]

In Memory of Ron Edwards 1930-2008

As the detail given above indicates, this volume is number 25 in the long standing series of Australian Folklore Occasional Papers which began with—

Number 1: Tune Origins for Australian Folksongs; and

Number 2: Australian Bawdy Ballads.

Most were written by Ron himself, but the following from other collectors/scholars may be noted:

Number 5: Shocking, Shocking, Shocking, by Wendy Lowenstein

Number 6: The Waltzing Matilda Debate, by Harry Pearce

Number 8: Joe Watson, Australian Singer, by Warren Fahey

Number 9: The Highwayman Tradition in Australia, by Graham Seal

Number 11: The Bastard from the Bush, by Brad Tate

Number 19: Songs of the Bush, by Phil Butters

Number 22: A History of Kangaroo Hunting, by Barry McDonald.

* This volume—one of pp.viii + 80 and in A4 format—is distributed by Fanged Wombat Productions. 121 Fenton Drive, Harcourt North, Victoria 3453, Australia. Fax: 03 5439 6525. Email: FangedWombat@activ8.net.au. Book number 363 from the Rams Skull Press, Kuranda, Queensland. ISBN 1 875872 82 5. R.R.P. \$25.00.



'The Minstrel', 1904 by Phil May. Cover image.

The present scholarly work is dedicated to the memory of Ron Edwards (1930–2008), Ron actually passing away while the book was being prepared for printing. Happily it is one graced by a number of Ron's own elegant and intuitive illustrations, as this report on the volume will show.

Keith McKenry's study also contains suggested arrangements for the numerous songs/ fragments that are here collected, contextualized and also given appropriate explanatory notes.

While those who use this reference work in the future will perhaps take its format and remarkably elucidating contents for granted, it must be said that this is Australian folk song scholarship at its sparkling best, i.e., sensitive, shrewd, provocative and, above all, luminous where there have hitherto been so/too many dark corners. Clearly Australia's folk music has been amazingly well served by both Ron Edwards and his longtime younger friend, Keith McKenry (1948–),¹ who has already a fine national and international reputation for his work in defining and maintaining the position of their folklore in all countries.

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Wherefore Percy Jones?

Dr. Percy Jones lived from 1914–1992, and so was born in the same year as Russel Ward (1914–1995). With his considerable musical talent evident as a youth, Percy had trained for the priesthood in both Rome and Ireland, particularly at the Pontifical Institute for Sacred Music, becoming ordained as a priest in 1937. He had returned to Melbourne in 1939, to give many decades of highly innovative and sensitive support

¹ See the outline of his life, pp. 252–253, in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, edited by Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal (Melbourne: O.U.P., 1993).

for drama and the arts to various Catholic community groups, creating both for adults and school children

The Quest... a residential course on all aspects of Catholic life for girls, a type of highly intellectual finishing school... Catholic culture, art, drama, plays, music, folk-dancing all formed part of the Quest. (Donald Cave, *Percy Jones: Priest, Musician, Teacher*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988, p. 29.

The unsigned article on Percy Jones in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore* (1993, pp. 217-218), is informative as far as it goes, and it ends with two points of some relevance—

- (i) that Jones had a long career as Assistant Dean at the University of Melbourne; and
- (ii) that the Ash Wednesday bush fires of 1983 had destroyed nearly all his papers.

It had also commented on the involvement of Percy Jones with ‘Gerry Waite’ of the *Melbourne Sun* newspaper. [That this name is a spelling slip for Waight is made abundantly clear from the present new and close scholarship by McKenry, as on pp. 2-9, 72.] Now we are able to put the significance—and the limited influence alike, of Percy Jones—in a much clearer perspective.

McKenry’s Re-focussed Chronology for Collecting, Performance and So for the Whole Scholarly Field of Australian Folk Songs

As a result of both his own skills and musical talents, his career pattern and (wide-ranging experience and global) opportunities, Keith McKenry has become the most significant catalyzing and researching figure for the current folklore scene in this country. His friendships, UNESCO contacts, publications and long time exposure to the Canberra/National Folk Scene have made him uniquely appropriate and the obvious person to re-create the ‘folk song’ history of this country—as he now does—in a lucid, convincing and deeply insightful exposition. (pp. 1-9)

The core of this is a re-defining of the current—and loosely used—terminology, going beyond ‘bush songs’ and their stereotypical bush settings and themes, and seeking rather all possible clues to ‘the overall complexion of songs sung in colonial Australia’ (p. 1). This quest, one only really practical/possible from the late 1960s, and so was/had to be conducted amongst those potential informants born in the earlier Twentieth Century, people with ‘only a fraction of their parents’ and grandparents’ musical repertoires’ (p. 1). Hence there needs to be close



Percy Jones



Burl Ives and Percy Jones

analysis of Jones' actions/the significance of Percy Jones in Victoria in the early 1940s, a necessary corrective to the records previously only derived from

a treasured, but unrepresentative, community in Eastern Australia of mainly elderly, male bush workers of British and/or Irish ancestry. This—both by default and design—is what has been passed on to us as the Australian Legend. (p. 2)

The Vein of Gold Mined by Waight and Jones

Serendipitously Keith McKenry has revisited a rich load, one located in a particular popular newspaper, and which preserves the early 1940s items from Jonathan Swift (C. Spensely Waight) in his then column in Melbourne's most popular daily newspaper, the *Sun-News Pictorial*. A chance meeting had occurred in September of 1940 [McKenry, p. 3] between the journalist Waight and the Rev. Dr. Percy Jones, who was then seeking Australian songs for a girls' school. The journalist had offered to assist Dr Jones by a press appeal for perhaps lost songs in his columns, specifically identifying the investigation and asking for 'old songs of the mining days', true melodies, and 'more of these old ballads' from 'the latter part of the century before the burlings of Tin Pan Alley

had troubled our ears, ... the real local songs of the diggings and shearing sheds’.

The actual responses from the readers would be uneven, only snippets, and often without tunes, so that

His [Jones’] entire known collection, including a number of texts he retained without tunes, numbers only twenty-eight items. (p. 3).

Notable items were ‘Click Go the Shears’, ‘The Old Bullock Dray’ and ‘The Wild Colonial Boy’, but they rested in the records and still needed to reach a wider public, a situation to be remedied by the 1952 visit to Australia of the popular American entertainer, Burl Ives, and his recording of several such songs on Decca Records. In addition to these three, a further three would be included in Stewart and Keesing’s 1957 edition of *Old Bush Songs*.

McKenry’s stunning achievement, as now published, is to have succeeded in identifying fifty of the seventy one, often from only distinctive/orderings of words/ snippets of phrase, by typing distinctive word clusters into the internet. Thereby he was able to locate them in broadside ballads from the United Kingdom, in sheet music from the United States, and /or in ‘Australian songsters from the late 19th century and early 1900s’ (p. 5). Variations in wording and the like allow them to satisfy the core criteria for folk song, viz:

- oral transmission;
- survival over generations;
- variation over time and place; and
- retention as part of a cultural heritage.

McKenry’s Self-Set Task and Achievement

Quite simply, our eminent scholar of (traditional) Australian folk song/folklore and of all its transmission—and of all the distortions accumulated in its survival—was concerned to research the background of each of the songs cited in Waight’s column. His task was to make an analysis of them and of the oddities in their transmission—and so he set out/attempted to provide a more authentic text. Thus he would—and did—collect up analogues/versions, first appearances in print and relevant socio-cultural comments, explaining why they might have reached the song bag, been modified, and then forgotten. [The scholar of classical and or mediaeval manuscripts will smile here, as this is so close

to their modern editors' method of textual reconstruction on the principle of *difficilior lectio potius*.^{2]}

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And the Range of the Themes in the Songs Themselves?

In a number of cases McKenry's shrewd comment is that they/the songs/the fragments, in their themes and hearers, weren't always concerned with the 'obvious'—i.e. gold and sheep—his analysis drawing attention to songs

- celebrating Australia's love of horse-racing;
- paying tribute to going to fight in England's wars, as in the Crimea or in the Sudan;
- popular pieces on Melbourne social life;
- sailors' songs, comic songs, songs about religion, etc.

Keith McKenry's location of the 'first Australian appearance in print' for so many must make us even more curious about those not yet identified as to their circulation and the possible/approximate date for their falling out of use. Clearly history, politics, excessive sentimentality and changing societal, patriotic and family structures would all have had a part to play.

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And the Present Achievement?

Quite certainly this is a work of scholarship that the earlier pioneering investigators Russel Ward, Nancy Keesing, Douglas Stewart, John Meredith and Ron Edwards would, alike, have savoured. It is a classic study, presented with wit, compassion and a deep respect for the thoughts and emotions of the ordinary folk living in Australia in the late nineteenth century. All of us who would come to a deeper understanding of the angsts of post-convict life in this new land have the greatest debt to both Ron Edwards and his long time crusading to capture the thoughts, songs, yarns and skills of the (white) settlers in Australia.

It is indeed good to know that the current heir to this mission has done so well with the song and music investigations that Percy Jones could not

² This is the axiom that, perhaps, in a long transmission with several uncomprehending scribes, an undue simplification has occurred, and so an editor engaged in clarification of meaning/ textual reconstruction should go beyond the stupid/ meaningless text and try to work out why a word/ words might well have been blurred in transcription, etc. Hence arises the term suggesting that a more incisive, stylish, cultured, and/ or logical 'original' might be capable of being retrieved for the later reader.

make in the 1940s. By honouring Ron Edwards thus, Keith McKenry has again confirmed his own ongoing achievement as the most imaginative and sensitive living recorder of the unevenly surviving traditional song and story culture of this settler nation.

It is the voice of non-metropolitan Australia and it is ever one concerned to affirm the thoughts, experience, and emotions that are the identity-bestowing legacy from Percy Jones, Spensely Waight, and those forgotten readers of a popular newspaper. Now all Australians—who are open to the rich heritage of this authentic songs, and the patterns of music associated with it—are deeply appreciative of this so appropriate tribute to Ron Edwards, one that he was able to savour at the end of his life.

‘On the Fourteenth of November’

This song fragment appeared in Waight’s column on 2 November 1940. It was submitted by a Mrs E.E.B of Urana, N.S.W. who recalled it as one her husband used to sing 55 years previously (i.e. around 1885).

On the fourteenth of November, a date I well remember,
 We started out to sail for foreign parts;
 With a grand three-masted clipper and Captain Bourke as skipper,
 We left our friends at home with broken hearts.
 We were bound out of Calcutta with a load of Belfast butter,
 Oh, we’d whisky, eggs and bacon in galore;
 Of passengers we’d twenty. By Jove, and that was plenty;
 To tell the truth our ship would hold no more.

(p. 29)

McKenry’s comment on his reads thus:

This seemingly is a song about a fictitious sea voyage, in the mould of The Irish Rover and the less-well known Captain Nipper. Sadly it appears that the fragment quoted by Waight is now all that survives.

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