

The Very Full Life and Final Triumphs of John Meredith (1920–2010) in the Sphere of Collecting and Publishing Australia’s Folk Culture

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ABSTRACT: In a self-effacing biography Keith McKenry has given Australia a magnificent view of John Meredith’s life and remarkable achievements as a folklore collector. The man, his circles, his influence and achievement have all been given sensitive and enthrallingly definitive treatment.

Prequel

The transmission by song and story of Australian folk culture may be said to be a topic by which scholars and the media have long addressed almost all of their efforts to try to understand the national folk lore, without, however, doing more than describe—rather than capture convincingly and with some real precision—the forces that have given the national experience from first white settlement a genuine pattern/convincing account, or to reflect that the commentators have not really, or adequately identified its enduring influences; and nowhere is this more the case than in their treatment of Australia-created settler song and ballad; and this is equally true, particularly in regard to its music, to its circumstances of original performance, and well as in its and their progressive evolution.

Certainly there are almost too many familiar names of collectors and editors, and so of more popular publications, associated with so many remembered/created aspects of the making of Australia’s non-Indigenous music and of the slowly developing settler cultural song and story; yet the true folklore and its real transmitters had long been neglected, and their modes of crafting and original performance deemed to be beyond recall, if it/they had ever existed. And yet John Meredith was for decades the leading warrior in the fight to collect, preserve and celebrate Australia’s unique folk music heritage, one that was largely to be that body of material recorded by him between 1953 and 1994, when he had recorded/collected from ordinary Australians thousands of songs, tunes, recitations, folk remedies, superstitions, sayings and yarns, in all cases

documenting the performance setting and cultural associations of the materials obtained from his informants.

Of course, the material was not on immediate offer, and he had had to encourage, question, support, get the informant in a proper, and so a sympathetic, context, and so to generally give all the possible encouragement whenever he had observed that need, before his informants then recalled details of this same cultural material. Indeed, details of work and domestic customs and folk medicines were often to be obtained at the same time as the fragments of song, story, tunes, and gestures progressively recalled by the shy and elderly whom he was able to make into reflective and quietly proud performers and rehearsers of items then brought back from their much earlier years. And it is also the case that much of what he was able to assemble had been thought to either not exist, or be far beyond any possible recall of the original folk songs of this country.

At the same time, John Meredith was also himself a key performer, establishing in 1952 the original Bushwackers Band, the group which would offer the music to become the musical, *Reedy River*, a creation that was heartwarming and causing feet stomping, as well as imbuing the audiences with an infectious gaiety that has already been long remembered. Further, this show had spurred him on in his two active periods of song collecting, as a young man in the 1950s, and from the 1970s onwards after he had retired. Each would result in a volume entitled *Folk Songs of Australia*, the first published in 1967, a work with many reprints, Meredith had called ‘easily the most important document in the Australian folk song revival’ (p. 229). It had been a joint work with the Victoria-based writer and publisher, Hugh Anderson (b. 1927) who had published the first significant book of Australian folk songs to include music, and one concentrating on the state of New South Wales. The method which they used was one which focussed on the singers and their homes/milieu, both personal and social, rather than working closely on motifs or phrases in their text. And it may be noted here that, in the second volume, songs were included from beyond the region of the earlier text, and there was often an attempt at filming settings and so capturing the nuances of the performer’s zone of both comfort and of the usually not well recalled life patterns.

Not the Recalled Songs from Great Britain

As others have noted, Meredith had always eschewed the brought-from-Britain songs when he was collecting, and he always sought the outback tales of the early settler time, with a marked emphasis on such themes as the bushrangers, or the occupational songs of shearers—as with the remarkable Duke Tritton—and those from the cane cutters, as

well as those of gold miners, many of which were, and are, to be regarded as ‘union songs’. And in the second book Meredith would include many songs by remarkable women singers whom he had encountered, like Sally Sloane, Mary Gilmore, and even Toni Seidel, who would sing for him in German. It may be noted that one of the shearers’ songs, ‘The Union Boy’, appears on the CD enclosed with McKenry’s book, one containing some ten traditional songs and five instrumental pieces as well as performances by members of the Bushwackers, along with two poems by Meredith, these being read by Keith McKenry.

However, the current public is well aware of the seminal background fact and influence, namely that the country’s initial European population had consisted almost entirely of convicts and of their guards, all largely drawn from the British Isles, and that they had brought with them so much of their ballad lore and style from Scotland, Ireland, and England, usually one that was current there in the eighteenth century and later. When these enforced ‘settlers’ began recalling and then inventing poems and songs about their new lives, they had inevitably used the style of verse, ballad, and song most familiar to them, and they had two initial staples for their songs’ shaping—a sad lamentation about the harshness of the new country, and an interwoven if distinct keen over their severance from home, and, with further addition, the enduring of very present fact, that of a bitter hatred of the regimented authority that constrained their lives.

In due course, the local born (and so their items as collected by Meredith) would much increase the range of sentiments expressed, elect to celebrate their several acts of defiance, chronicle derisively acts of armed and other robbery, and so perform a verbal challenge from outside the official and regimented system, to create a strong subculture, one orally expressed and often put into satisfying action within their new society.

And so to the Change to The Collected Songs’ Themes and so to the Collector’s Urge to Give Resounding Voice to an Honest and Evolving Nationalism

The discovery of gold in 1851 had brought an influx of Americans and a variety of Europeans seeking their fortunes, and the same time prompting the conclusion of transportation, and the progressive expansion of the frontiers by the pastoral industry would be accompanied by an enormous extension of the settler-occupied lands. That time was one for various new and other now generated local styles of composition, especially those embracing the working conditions of the frontier, of all aspects of the sprawling world of pastoralism, of bush recreation and also

of the humour to be distilled from the ironies of their often exhausting and remarkably harsh working lives. Disgust at pretention, of grumbling at hardship, tales of egalitarianism, for the praise of terrible harshness endured, and the finding of humour in the everyday disasters of frontier life, and in the necessary social and political egalitarianism—these were all to be staples of the emerging and distinctively Australian ballad tradition, and John Meredith, working quietly from the 1950s, had been able to collect a remarkable of new/hitherto unrecorded items, to add remarkable numbers of pieces to these existing fields of published song.

And it is with this background of freshness of approach that we must apply to any appraisal of the remarkably comprehensive and definitive achieved corpus of work of John Meredith (1920–2001), a man who remains, par excellence, the greatest and by far the most significant recorder of the song and ballad tradition of what would become the nation of Australia.

Scholarship / Recognition of Australian Folk Materials

From the mid-twentieth century a succession of storytellers and historians/ scholars of the folk tale, and of its scholarship, had been slowly emerging in the area of Australian studies, as with the post-war contributions then of Bill Wannan, Hugh Anderson, Bill Scott, and Russel Ward, amongst others, all of these named having had volumes of the now and relatively longtime annual journal, *Australian Folklore*, dedicated to their nationally significant accomplishments.

Indeed, it was fitting that John Meredith be recognized, if somewhat skeletally, in this folkloric, investigating and recording chronicle in the year 2000, with the issue of *Australian Folklore*, Journal Number 15,¹ for he had long been a precious ‘icon’ of Australian folk culture, however much he would undoubtedly deplore this often bestowed reference to his life’s work.

While other well-earned encomia of his contributions may be cited, it is appropriate to turn to the recent fine biography and interwoven social history of the career of John Meredith in the many formative milieus as had occurred throughout his eventful life. This is now to be found in full force and presented with enormous sympathy in the splendid study, *More Than a Life: John Meredith and the Fight for Australian Tradition*, the

¹ In that volume there may be found Peter Parkhill’s ‘John Meredith and the Men and Women who Sang and Played for Him’, ‘A Select bibliography of Meredith’s Writings, Songs and Music’, from John S. Ryan and Keith McKenry; John Meredith’s own ‘Gathering Songs in Australia’, a 1987 perspective from him, and an excerpt from the ‘Preface’ (1994) to his *Real Folk* (1995).

In the last he referred to the fact that he had recorded and photographed ‘over 700 performers’, and he had also commented that his title referred to those who had ‘given so freely of their time, their songs and their music (*loc.cit.*, p. 39).

volume now offered us in 2014 by Keith McKenry, as both the biographer and the sympathetic and friendly publisher of this distinctive and distinguished survey of a vast production and of a distinctive and doughty life. For his subject's career was one of a life lived to the full in its range of activities and in the imaginative way in which this man of the people had sought to identify the style, spirit, and thoughts in action of the folk of Australia.

More Than a Life

As the reader will realise from the outset, this is a remarkably rich and generous book, and an engaging one, where the biographer and his friend and subject may well remind us most of the Dr Johnson and Boswell affinity in their like ensnaring of the significant culture of another land and of its national milieu. For, in each case, the subject's life had embraced an age and a nation's most defining and culturally formative era, and it had, simultaneously, involved many interlocking milieus, personalities and a distinctive mental climate, one that demanded of an/ that era's biographer a supporting mix of knowledge, perspective and empathy, all of which are needed in a significant and nation-chronicling writer and significant and insightful collector of his country's cultural fragments and records. However, there is infinitely more in the Australian case in the zest and empathy with which the collector had approached both his own life's trials and the like experiences of ordinary and largely but a generation-migrated folk.

In both subject and biographer in the Australian case there was clearly not just a fine match, but an enormous mutual respect between the two friends and national chroniclers, so that the book shares these feelings with its readers, even as it indicates both the patience and the conviction of its writer as to the national significance of his by then already departed human subject; and so it reports with much insight and understanding the field of experience and emotion which they both embraced so passionately. And thus we come to the amazing volume of historical and cultural record, of diverse experience, and of total commitment and focus, that nicely entitled *More than a Life: John Meredith and the Fight for Australian Tradition*.

Its author is Keith McKenry (b. 1948), long a champion of folklore in Australia.² With an early career in Australian government service and the attempt to define policy as to the folk environment, and with much overseas cultural experience, McKenry would become the officer from Australia, duly selected/ to be asked to chair the UNESCO Special Committee of Technical and Legal Experts on the Safeguarding of

² He has been listed in *Australian Folklore* for a number of years now.

Folklore, as well as serve on the long still ongoing Commonwealth Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia.³

These two bodies, despite their subsequent fading and eclipse, were seminal from that period to folklore's assuming a significant and so much more properly documented and appraised place in Australian cultural history, and, not indirectly, the friends of the genre; and so, within a decade of the milestone 1986 2nd National Folklore Conference, the general area would be moving to the founding of the journal, the soon-to-be annually issued *Australian Folklore*,⁴ and so to a much more official recognition and close, and partly academic, recording of this nation-defining subject and discipline.

But to Return to Keith McKenry

He had already published widely in this field when he had himself first met John Meredith at the Bush Music Festival held in Sydney in 1979, and at which he himself was performing as a reciter; for this had been at a time when McKenry was working in the department headed by Barry Cohen, Minister for the Arts and Heritage, and, like him, was concerned to create major efforts in regard to Australia's folk heritage. And McKenry had already been engaged in inspecting folklore institutions in North America and Europe (see *op. cit.* p. 300, ff.) And then, it is recalled, Meredith could not be persuaded to make a submission to the National Committee (p. 308), being content to work through his existing contacts with known folk people⁵ in Canberra. However, about 1986, he was able to link up with a much earlier contact, the collector, the Queenslander Ron Edwards (see p. 318), even as he,

³ We may note the short piece on him, which refers to this, in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, edited by Gwenda Davey and Graham Seal.

⁴ While there were to be two issues initially, the journal would soon become an annual and, duly, become separated from the Australian Folk Trust. Perhaps one of the most significant catalysts to this development was to be the 'inaugural and exploratory National Folklore Conference at Melbourne in November 1984, and then the much larger Second National Conference held in Sydney in October 1986, a gathering concerned 'to examine the current state of the practice of folklore 'conservation' and 'folk-life studies' in Australia, and a time when it was stated—with both optimism and a measure of conviction—that 'a particular emphasis will / would be placed upon the consolidation of both relevant arts policy and government activity pertinent to the field'.

It had also said the that 'the conference will therefore focus on prospects and problems in planning, financing, and the interpreted care of the Australian Folk heritage' (from the *Proceedings* (1987) of that same Conference, p. i.)

⁵ See below for the names of several of the group, mainly in the National Archives, who would become enthused with this cultural task, and able to assist John Meredith in so many ways. They certainly came to become the main supporting group for the discipline, and were able to offer a much expanded supporting service beyond that which had been available from the Mitchell Library in Sydney after World War II, and for a number of years.

Meredith, would meet up with many other more regional/genre/ethnically focussed collectors over the years.

But it is time to return to the main text and its place in the more scholarly record of the folk revival's personalities, following on from the earlier scene, one neatly and recently defined for us by Dave Arthur's *Bert: The Life and Times of A.L. Lloyd* (2012). In actual fact, McKenry has investigated rigorously the belief by Meredith that the latter had lifted some of the songs of his own collecting, and there were like problems with the work of John Greenway.⁶ But let us return to the man and the central story that McKenry tells. It is a tale of modest beginnings and of a lifelong struggle to attain the cultural and recording and defining objectives that he had set himself.

Of humble family, born in Holbrook, in New South Wales in 1920 into a large family, Meredith had early played the button accordion, much as his all too soon to pass away father had done. The youngest of a large family, he had learned to struggle on his own in many spheres, and how to play music from the locals in Holbrook—for his father had died when he was only nine years of age—and, despite being dux of his school, had had to leave school at fourteen, and by seventeen he would often play at dances, but, after the death of his father, and in the Depression, he was forced to leave all formal education and work as a pharmacist's mate, a sphere in which, although unqualified, he would obtain sufficient employment, as needed, for many years.

And thus, work and early and somewhat questing travel and pastoral and related employment to the north and into Queensland apart, he would soon become engaged in the passions of his life, music, collecting from surviving performers the traditional songs of the bush, and making careful photographs of performers in action in their own milieus, a skill aligned in many ways to the opportunities afforded him in his long time employment as a working and travelling, if unqualified, pharmaceutical dispenser.

Thus the book also tells us of his years of his break out from Holbrook and its restrictions on him, then of his time of emancipation in Melbourne, and then of his further adventuring in Queensland, to so finally settle in Sydney, where he would join the Eureka League, the Communist Party, and the People's Choir, these last constituting a step which operated to cause him to begin to seek out traditional Australian songs for possible inclusion in that same choir's repertoire.

The early part of the present book is based on Meredith's unpublished autobiography, called 'More Than a Life', which was adopted by McKenry as the first part of his own present title. And this is a proper

⁶ See especially Jennifer Gall's review of the book in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 3, 2014.

description, since the activities of his life included an exhausting array of activities in addition to collecting and the ‘Fight for Australian Tradition’—housebuilding, variously operating as a smallholder, rabbit catcher, poet, and player of the accordion in Australia’s first folk band to have a considerable public following, The Bushwackers.

Many tales are told of Meredith as the collector, as the www entries on him make very clear, but the important aspect of it all is that, if songs are ‘collected’, they will change and must do as they did in the past, if they are to truly live.

In the Natfolkfest entries on the www for 2015, it is indicated that John Meredith will be celebrated then as one of the great song collectors of the modern world, and, more specifically, as ‘the leading warrior in the fight to preserve and celebrate Australia’s unique folk heritage ... and [as] Australia’s foremost pioneer in folk song performance.’ Appropriately Keith McKenry was to be scheduled to present a special launch of his Meredith book at the 2015 National Folk Festival, with the full support of the National Library of Australia. This last is peculiarly appropriate in view of the manner in which he was able to work so long and closely with archivists and other scholars in the field, from the time of his receipt of his first grant, in 1960, from the Australian Literature Fund, to publish a book on his field work and recordings.

The Times and Modes of John Meredith’s Collecting

John Meredith had had two periods of active song collecting in his life, in the vigorous decade of the 1950s, and from the 1970s onwards, each of them resulting in a volume. That entitled *Folk Songs of Australia* was not to appear in print until 1967, and it was to have many reprints and so McKenry calls it, as the first published work of its sort, ‘easily the most important single volume in the Australian song revival’ (*op. cit.*, p. 229), it being a work co-written with the original Committee chairman, Hugh Anderson, who had then done the first considerable book of folk songs with music, these only from New South Wales.

In the case of the second period of collecting, Meredith had by then also begun to record on film, and include songs in languages other than English. His emphasis was always on folk life, the bush/ outback narratives and with a particular emphasis on occupational groups like shearers and cane cutters, but there were also the political strand to the material, whether that of the rumbustious voices of provoked gold miners or shearers.

However, the second book was to be a ‘softened’ one, in that Meredith had included women singers, such as Sally Sloane, Mary Gilmore, and Toni Seidel, who would sing in German.

In Brief Summary

John Meredith must be recognised as one of the world's greatest and most achieving folk song collectors, and his life has now found a worthy chronicler and interpreter. Initially Keith McKenry treats of John Meredith's battle against poverty, cultural deference/ obsequiousness, and the remarkable indifference to folklore work which was so apparent in his lifetime. Indeed, as the Australian National Library has pronounced thus (in the advance notice of the launching of the McKenry book) that 'John Meredith was one of the world's greatest folk song collectors', and it then calling the planned official launch lecture by its author, 'John Meredith and the Fight for the Australian Tradition'.

Many other aspects of Meredith's private life, his slow-to-start and uneven friendships, and the selected spheres of traditional work and his experience in them may be discussed, and amplified, from any close study of his writings, but it is clear that his position in the field of folkloric research, in any comparative sense, is of world significance.

Further, it is to be emphasised that he had from the start availed himself of all the available aids, notably those of sound recording devices and from his excellent habit of noting the work and performance settings, or context—of both singers and of their preferred places and situations of performance—to explore, collect, and record their amazing mix of cultures, (bush) work patterns, prejudice, first from the older pastoral scene and tasks, and then of migrant races that were to hand in his lifetime, and this always done with scrupulous recording of their work circumstances and their preferences as to performance. And it is now the case that the final Meredith Collection, as housed in the National Library of Australia, contains nearly 8,000 catalogued items including photos and related material collected from over 700 performers.

The Bushwackers and so to the Musical, 'Reedy River'

In 1952, John Meredith had formed the first Australian bush band with Jack Barrie and Brian Loughlan, a group originally known as the 'Heathcote Bushwackers', and then just 'The Bushwackers', one concerned to collect and record and then perform bush music and produce it with traditional instruments: Meredith playing the button or bush accordion / squeezebox, and the tin whistle; Barrie playing the bush bass or tea chest bass; and Loughlan performing on the lagerphone. Late in 1952 they had given their first performance in Hurstville, and the name of the band was changed permanently to 'The Bushwackers'. Then in December 1953, the band had performed in the Sydney New Theatre amateur production of *Reedy River*, an Australian musical play written by Dick Diamond and featuring bush and folk music, much of which had

been collected by Meredith. And it is claimed, and widely accepted, that the play had been the primary inspiration of the Australian folk music revival of the 1950s, and further. While the Bushwackers had disbanded in 1957, many of its members had continued to perform in various bush bands, and Meredith himself had continued to collect field recordings.

And the Team of Sympathetic Fellow Researchers

In his most impressive book McKenry also explores in some helpful detail the pattern of collecting and research going on around and catalysed by the thrust of the collecting of John Meredith—and not just from the National Library—as he was also concerned with many other aspects of working class culture; and so, as we read, we are given helpful perspectives on the interests and perceptions of Edgar Waters, Russel Ward, Peter Parkhill, and so many others,⁷ and on the partnership formed by Nancy Keesing and Douglas Stewart in anthologising bush ballads and songs—but relying so largely on published material. Further, Hilda Lane is noted, as is her friend the rouseabout, Jack Lee, to whom she had introduced Meredith in 1953.

Equally interesting is the interwoven pattern of friendships and helpers in the period of the rise of the National Library, after the fading of the almost national assistance that the Mitchell Library had sought to give after World War II. And so we gain glimpses of Edgar Waters, at various phases of his life; of Russel Ward; of the partnership formed by Nancy Keesing and Douglas Stewart to anthologise bush songs and bush ballads, but all of which had relied on published sources; and of the help of Hilda Lane and others. Further, Keith McKenry, with unflinching fairness and compassion, notices very carefully and fairly the often crucially sympathetic persons to the recording of the folk movement and its writings and music, and who were able to go on working with John Meredith at ‘the coalface’. Thus we have further details, of papers, fugitive references, and reputed surviving materials, and over a considerable period, as with Rob Willis, Peter Ellis, Kevin Bradley, Warren Fahey, Hugh Anderson of course, Chris Sullivan and others.⁸ And in the attached to the book selection of field recordings, there are not merely items from the musical, *Reedy River*, but contrasting settings from the field, and some fine interpretations from Rob Willis’s band, Wongawilli.

⁷ Perhaps the admirable indices, so strong on the names of individual persons could have been expanded somewhat, as some few names are not included there, and a subsequent edition might well, with profit to researchers, use a somewhat larger font for its index text.

⁸ All of these have appeared in the volumes of *Australian Folklore* in various connections, and they may be followed in the full and contents-consolidated indices attached to the volumes of that publication as from no 11.

From this it will be more than clear that John Meredith had fired a generation of research and research support persons who had appreciated his national significance and focus on hitherto neglected fields, and they were not to be put off by his occasional brusqueness; and so they had contributed with him to the every increasing significance of the research work into Australia-located folk song, music and work, and colonial and traditional/ more modern domestic and occupational customs, and they had gladly worked beside/ joined with him in their celebration in song, or were concerned with the necessary collection of the hugely significant and surviving craft items that might, and should, be held in the true museums of the people.

Not Forgetting the Early and Articulate Writings

Even as he had long pondered the folk experience, so the record limned here is a long one, as with his surviving recording of a dialogue on folklore between Frank Hardy and Alan Marshall in 1950, and his 1954 work with Dick Diamond and David Milliss on the songs for the *Reedy River* as produced in that year. Similarly, Meredith had written on Ned Kelly in *Overland* for Winter, No 4, in 1955, and worked alongside Joan Clarke, on *The Wild Colonial Boy*: an Australian musical drama in three acts, in the same year, as well as issuing in that year, *Songs from the Kelly Country*, through the Bush Music Club, in Sydney. And in the next three years he had written on the theme, 'How Many Miles from Gundagai?' in *The Bulletin*, and the essays 'The Song of the Blades' and 'Henry Lawson's Mate', while in the following three years he would contribute to *The Bulletin* and to *Walkabout* on folk song, as well as having his 'Bawdy Bush Ballads' appear in *Meanjin* in the Summer issue of 1958.

Other Late Major Productions

And the more informed reader will have noted that there has not been space for discussion of some of the collector's later works, as of:

- a) Meredith, J., ed. *Duke of the Outback: The Adventures of 'A Shearer Named Tritton'*, Red Rooster Press, 1983;
- b) *Folk Songs of Australia, and the Men and Women Who Sang Them*, Vol.2, Kensington, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 1987;
- c) *The Last Kooradgie: Moyungully: Chief Man of the Gungungurra People*, Kangaroo Press, 1989; and
- d) *Breaker's Mate: Will Ogilvie in Australia*, Kenthurst, Kangaroo Press, 1996.



John Meredith and Keith McKenry, February 1994

Yet the achievement of the biographer writer is of national significance as he has met the challenges set up by his subject and produced an enthralling account of a life of compassion, empathy, and of a steadfast concern to capture the songs and music of the people. Quite certainly this generous biographic account explains for the twenty-first century the musicians and performers who were at the heart of the folk culture that defined the temper of their nation.

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