

Colin Munro (b. 1940) and the Making of a Significant Australian Folklorist's Career

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ABSTRACT: Colin Munro must be seen as one of the most significant shapers of Australian identity in and for the twentieth century. For it was largely he who 'restored a bush ethos' to war-weary Australians in the third quarter of the century. Engaging, direct, charismatic even, Colin gave sincerity, strength and a new sense of nationhood to Australians after the Depression and World War Two. Quite simply, he defined Australian domestic identity's bush character and refocused for us an infinite respect for all rural battlers and the builders of modern Australia.

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To the many of us who live largely in the global stresses of 2009, in a near 'global' society with a myriad of predispositions, cultures and global/ threatening notions—seemingly, with but few folkloric mores in common—it does not often occur to us to question the prior circumstances which brought about/ created, if you like, our largely and so casually accepted 'Australian' narrative of our identity-bestowing social structures. These last were largely developed—and much more widely recognized—in the second third of the twentieth century. Yet the core of these significant and affectionately accepted mores emerges from the earlier and so much more culturally central/ 'significant' rural communities.

We in the early 21st century see only that which both interests us and largely involves our daily activities and structures, as well as the conduct and thought patterns of our present and immediate society. So it is with so much of our music, manners, behaviour and regular rituals, in a word, with the common customs/ accepted traditions of the/ our 'Australian' folk. There is, however, a persistent affection for an older 'Australia', a more comfortable one perhaps simplistically—and immediately for most—associated with Ian McNamara's *Australia All Over* radio programme on Sunday mornings, and with Tamworth and all the activities there subsumed in the catch phrase, 'Australia's Country Music Capital'.

It is the contention of this investigatory and country-remembering paper that much of this recognised and accepted 'continuity' in the

country's bush tradition owes itself to the persistent, charismatic and committed service of the largely neglected Colin Munro (b. 1940).

But who was / is Colin Munro?

When we seek to enquire more deeply into the transmission of a certain culture's/ national community's mores, we may well find that a seemingly minor event and time in the past was the stimulus for a catalysing individual career—one which might well later benefit the whole community, generation and/or a specific and catalyst area in highly significant fashion. And when do such lives-that-become-legends begin? Well, this one started at a hugely climactic time and place—the seventh of July in 1940, in Montreal, Canada, and even then there were dramatic and highly significant influences potently at work upon it.

A world war had begun, a desperate national defence, one man's [Colin's father's] ultimate capture and internment, an escape from war-torn England and a lucky survival on the perilous voyage to Canada—all these culminated in the birth of the infant Colin Munro, a boy whose life and personality would, much later, impact so strongly on so many people in a far distant part of the world. This was a less than auspicious start for one who was to become such an elegant and affectionately regarded spokesman for two generations of a country's rural people. His father in a P.O.W. camp, an expatriate Australian mother in difficult and estranged circumstances in a foreign country; this was the reality of their position—not that such difficulties would be a problem for the stalwart Barbara Munro, née Piedon, nor the obvious difficulty of six thousand miles of ocean to cross, to get back home with her infant.

His Australian Family

Barbara Constance Wyburn Piedon, at that time working as an architect in England, had married a young Scot, Colin Patrick Munro, a member of the London Scottish (Regiment), and currently employed by the London branch of the Bank of Egypt. Mr Munro was selected for Officer Training, won a commission in the Cameronians, and would be sent to Europe with the British Expeditionary Force in France. They saw fighting at Ebecomene Canal, and then fought a rearguard action all the way back to the beaches of the Atlantic, where in a last ditch stand to protect the wounded during the desperate rescue attempt of the British Army, Munro and the few remaining Cameronians were captured and incarcerated in Germany.

Meanwhile, the advancing pregnancy of Mrs Munro suggested her immediate inclusion in the class of persons who were to be got out of the country, in order to avoid the anticipated onslaught by the German

bombing, and likely invasion. Women and children, as well as those others who were seen to be most vulnerable, were moved away in the convoys to the United States, Canada and the West Indies etc., prior to the desperate defence of the homeland. Desperate times produce desperate measures and personal risks and, equally, much heroic achievement, bravery and imagination.

It has indeed been argued that the infant Colin Munro, already introduced into this tale of the unexpected, was the first infant to fly the Pacific Ocean. He achieved this because of a request to Robert Casey¹ via Pat Jarret, private secretary to May Casey, who had arranged for a Colonel in the U.S. Air Force to organise a flight for Colin and his mother across the Pacific to Australia. This was an island-hopping and extraordinarily dangerous epic flight by flying boat to Rose Bay, in Sydney. Colin himself was duly presented with a certificate to verify this passage, it making him one of the very few people then to fly the Pacific and—almost certainly—was the youngest to have done so.

Nurture in Sydney

Now back in Sydney but with an absent father, Colin was brought up at the old home. His mother, a feisty forceful woman among the many associated with her group advocating women's advancement. Her then circle included such figures as Betty Archdale, with a double-degree in economics/ politics from Canada and who had gone to the University of London for a law degree. These women were 'all rounders', and Betty was also Captain of the English Women's Cricket Team and later Headmistress of Abbotsleigh School for Girls. She was also on the Council for the Women's College at the University in Sydney.²

With a grandfather a lecturer of Law at the University of Sydney and advisor to the Governor of New South Wales on matters regarding Constitutional and Political Law, and many great men of note as family friends and acquaintances, Colin lacked for little of wise advice in the absence of his father, who would only re-appear from his internment in a German P.O.W. camp when Colin was five or six. They got to know one another belatedly but then enjoyed a relationship much more a real friendship than that between father and son.

Colin had attended Mowbray House at Chatswood and then Sydney Grammar, there to be much inspired by the School's attitude to life and education. One year, at the very same desk that A.B. 'Banjo' Patterson

¹ Later Casey would be given a peerage for his services to various Imperial Councils of the War period.

² Incidentally, Barbara Munro played for the Australian team as a bowler, while Colin's aunt Margaret Elizabeth Piedon was the first captain of the Australian Women's Cricket Team.

had boldly carved his name into in an earlier period—(Colin proudly added his name into it as well)—and so followed in the school traditions there that were established by such earlier notables as Thomas Browne (Rolf Boldrewood). Sir John Piedon K.C.M.G., KC., B.A., LL.B, Dean of the Faculty of Law at Sydney, President of the New South Wales Upper House, advisor to its Government, Chairman of Trustees at Sydney Grammar School and, of course, grandfather to one Colin Munro. Even then the great interest was whether he had inherited his mother's and aunt's abilities at cricket.

Colin was not a brilliant scholar, but geology was an exciting subject and it was enthusiastically received by the young Munro, and later to be of considerable assistance and significance with Soil Science and similar fields, when he did his Agriculture Diploma at the Wagga Wagga Agricultural College. At 'Grammar', a number of promising starts were made by him. He enjoyed the Cadets and the cricket, but it was here he learnt that Shakespeare can be fun and he became a Prefect (he says, unfortunately not really deserved),³ and he was encouraged to enter a Spoken English contest for the Christopher Taylor Prize. He won the book, *Australian Bush Ballads*, as a prize and so began a lifetime commitment to and association with Australian ballads and (bush) verse and, in turn, with the whole range of Australian literature. It was with great regret, years later, when Colin Munro was visiting the school to open the A.B. Patterson Library, that he discovered that that wonderful desk with such a magnificent inscription had been thrown away and so lost forever. Such a waste of tradition and of heritage.

Colin's Turning to the Bush

The Piedons, Colin's grandfather and great-uncle and their families, held country far down the south coast of N.S.W., at Bermagui, where the young Munro was allowed to run and be at one with the country lifestyle and with the bush people. This was not just a fun activity, for it soon became a passion and a lifelong commitment to the country people, battling as they were considerable difficulty and deprivation in order to supply the nation's need for food and fibre. And I think Colin felt, and then savoured, much of the 'bush's defiant character and forceful yet elusive and quirky identity.

This life long association with the hinterland and its reflective and honest and compassionate people has been the Golden Thread of Colin Munroe's existence and, with the notable inclusion of his other driving force, his wife, it has directed and enthused both his entire career as well

³ It will be obvious to the reader that this tribute is based on a measure of contact with Colin Munro and his wife, and shaped with some generous access to their family records and memorabilia.

as his peculiarly subtle and yet openly transparent personal life—if indeed they could ever be separated.

And at Wagga

At Wagga Agricultural College (now Charles Sturt University) the staff and students transformed ‘Munro the Mott’⁴ to Munro the agriculturalist in only three years, an achievement often performed at that establishment, but one which, in this particular case, bore quite unexpected fruit.

It was at Wagga, too, that the Principal (Dick Damon) gave Colin a piece of personal advice, ‘Munroe, I think you are going to earn your living with your voice’. Prophetic words indeed, for that same magnificent, haunting and yet mellifluous tone became the ‘Voice of the Bush’, in later years to be revered by millions across the Nation. Still when he left Wagga it was agriculture, not oratory, which beckoned Colin Munro. First at Tutt Bryant’s in Queensland, where he was associated or introduced to Alice Chalmers (Tractors and Earthmoving) and with the Orient Brahmin Cattle Stud at Ingham (in far north Queensland).

Work was being done there with soil science (inculcating nitrogen into soil via plants), but Colin, though fascinated by the science, did not feel comfortable in the sub-tropics. This caused him, to leave the Tutts enterprise quite amicably, and return to Sydney where he was offered a job in Keith, South Australia. This one was with Hugh Robinson and Co. pastoral consultants and managers. Significantly the range of his experiences was quickly increasing as was a familiarity with very diverse terrains and agricultural conditions.

This last named company was much involved in ‘taxation farming’ of the deserts around Bordertown on both sides of the Victorian and South Australian state lines on behalf of non-resident owners. The purchase and distribution of thousands of tonnes of super-phosphate, co-ordination of trucks and planes to spread it etc., was an essential introduction to (necessary) farming logistics—and to economic statistics—on a grand scale. Travelling across the country, 2,000 feet up, standing on a narrow bar, inside an enclosed super box, in an aeroplane, is not pleasant, but it was part of Colin’s everyday life at this time.

For a man so tall and athletic, that small box would have been very similar to his father’s solitary confinement as a P.O.W. One wonders if a

⁴ This form of nickname referred to a form of fungoid bacteria capable of existing in the excreta of a gnat. This information is to be found in an interview (TRC 5460) with C. Munro conducted by Dr Rob Linn and the recording and a transcript being held in the Oral History Section of the National Library of Australia.

heart as big as Colin's could fit into a mouth so modest, but no doubt it would have been exciting.

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Working for the People, 'His People'

Fencing on a huge scale—pumps (they lost one that weighed 600 lbs down a bore and had to fish for it), machinery and fairly constant pressure to perform—all these matters were the forge in which the young Munro was moulded and the handling of men, from stump-pickers to senior engineers, was another part of the learning process for him. From hot furnaces comes good steel and these formative years were to stand Colin in good stead for his future role as an 'Ambassador to the Bush and its People'.

The inoculating of clovers for pasture improvement was the sort of innovative process which was at the forefront of agriculture at that point and Colin Munro was one of the frontline of observers and theorists, along with forward thinkers like Chris Shearer. Yet he had a troublesome knee and the development work was winding up, so that he went back to Sydney finally, in order to get some osteo-arthritic treatment. While there he revisited the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, where he had had an earlier interview before going to South Australia and had been told he needed more experience on the ground—this being the reason for his working in South Australia for Robinson and Co. This time he was perceived as a more credible employee, and even welcomed.

He was then sent to Melbourne to fill the large shoes of Guy Ballantyne, someone then very special in the way of television reporters. In Melbourne Colin was in the charge of Owen Davies, a robust and fairly outspoken Welshman who did not suffer fools gladly. He was not impressed with the new ABC recruit, but by careful approach and a willingness to accept advice, Colin gained his acceptance and even received much wise advice.

His Private Life

At this time Stuart Cameron and Colin's brother, Jock, were at Tocal Agricultural College at Patterson together and involved in a little match-making with Stuart's sister and Jock's brother (Colin). Invited up to Tocal on Diploma Day at the college, Colin took one look at 'Muffy' and decided this was the one; no one else would do. It would appear the feeling was mutual and a lifelong friendship and romance were begun, each still as fresh and incredible to this day.



*Notice was taken of the ABC's efforts to interest country audiences.
(Brisbane Sun, 25 August 1985)*

Little did the matchmakers know how perspicacious were their endeavours in the field of love, trust and romance. Few couples were and are so well-matched and compatible, and so much of the success that Colin enjoyed was enhanced by a stable, loving and reinforcing relationship at home. This ideal was soon strengthened by a lifestyle of sharing in all things.

Women are the Force

Colin's career with the ABC was widely varied, but it was primarily concerned with the rural sector. This department dealt mainly with agricultural matters, with a core emphasis on the social cement of what may be termed 'the Rural Culture', the framework and the cement for all applied and successful agriculture. No doubt market reports and special agricultural segments were highly significant to the rural community; however, their presentation must never interfere with the timing of the iconic serial, *Blue Hills*. For Colin knew well, from the beginning, that

the women and their interest in the trials of their sisters and brothers were the strength at the heart of all rural enterprises.⁵

The bush listeners to the early radios (often run on 6 or 12 volt car batteries)—and later to television—saw the ABC as their ‘personal window’ to the greater world, a fantasy world sometimes, yet one which kept them in touch with the great ‘outside’. The people who created this complex and often emotional sound drama—and so perceptive window into their lives—were indeed their people and so were loved, revered, criticised, recognised for all their eccentricities, and so accepted into their lives as family and generally considered as one of their own folk. Rarely forgotten, even after one vague or casual meeting, the ABC rural reporters or trainees, as they were known, were responsible for a large part of the cohesion and sense of community among the bush folk.

A Position of Privilege

These trainees for the ABC were given, and both earned and enjoyed a position of ‘privilege’ with the rural community and the ‘funny’ in their behaviour and converse was tolerated and considered acceptable, while the ‘stupid comment or attitude’ was not well received by the country folk at all and would often be met with derision and disappointment at trust betrayed. These rural reporters were trusted and relied upon by their listener/ viewers and, in their turn, they developed a rapport with each other which was both personal and interactive, and they often could—and did—become folk legends.

The bush itself, like the life there, is so full of stories which can be made serious and become bush sagas, or modified as anecdotes, short films, ongoing dramas—or day-to-day continua—which inform, entertain and enlarge the spirit despite the harshest of circumstances.

Colin Monro and the men and women in the rural department of the ABC—particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s—were very much part of the fabric of the bush; the ABC was an institution dedicated to the procurement, interpretation and deliverance of news and information in a particular style and firm and convincing manner. The commercialism of the media system had—and still has—little effect upon the rural people of the ABC. Internal hierarchies and organisational structures within the organisation were powerful and considerable. Yet this often reinforced the opposing attitudes as to the role of the ABC and its personnel towards the Bush and the folk who lived there, thus making for a truly magnificent and beneficial organisation at home and abroad.

⁵ Significantly he would maintain a considerable respect for Gwen Meredith (b. 1907), the writer of both *Blue Hills* (1949-1976), an amazingly long-running, revealing and resilient radio serial that encapsulated so much of the perdurable bush experience of the nation..



ABC Rural's fiftieth anniversary celebrations in Adelaide, 30 September 1995. From left: Colin Munro, Ethel Lang (Blue Hills' Meg McArthur), Queenie Ashton (Blue Hills' Granny Bishop) and at back Ian Doyle.

. . . And of Trust

For this reportage and the regular listening to it—even commenting back in due course—was a trust and a reliance which surmounted the mere commercialism of other media outlets or sources. Similarly, he would ‘find’ such figures as the Bush Bards, Keith Garvey and particularly Col Newsome, and make them household figures in the bush. Of these so many heroes of the last frontier Colin Munro, as facilitator and interpreter, stands peerless. Further, and the point is powerful even as it is a truism, many of the great planners within the ABC were widely recognised as deeply committed people, in their own right, before their association with ‘Aunty’. It is this position of the enormous responsibility of the rural broadcasters and of the consequent receiving the trust of so many that makes Colin Munro—however much he may not rank in the city—one of the pre-eminent of the nation-fashioners of the second half of the twentieth century.⁶

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⁶ It has been a privilege to meet the Munro family, not least since they were a shaping force in the bush life of the present writer, as he has come to realise more and more with the passage of time.