

Industrial Song and Folksong

Mark Gregory

ABSTRACT: This essay explores the relationship between folksong in its classic state and songs and poems that report and describe life in industrial society—Industrial Songs. It also considers the tradition of industrial song in Australia, and finds it as important a strand as the bush tradition.

An interesting recent find of researcher Peter Knox is Melinda Kendall's 'The Colliers Strike Song', published in the *Illawarra Mercury*, October 3, 1885. Melinda Kendall, mother of the poet Henry, was a 19th-century Australian writer, pioneer and teacher.

The Colliers' Strike Song

Come all ye jolly colliers, and colliers' wives as well,
 And listen to my ditty, for the truth I mean to tell;
 It's of a colliers' wage dispute, is the burden of my song;
 I mean to cheer you up, if it won't detain you long.
 For masters they are grumbling, in country and in town,
 They want to starve poor miners, by cutting wages down;
 But if you stick together, and every one be true,
 You are sure to be triumphant singing cock-a-doodle-doo.

Chorus:

For masters they are grumbling, in country and in town,
 They want to starve poor miners, by cutting wages down;
 But if you stick together, and every one be true,
 You are sure to be triumphant singing cock-a-doodle-doo.

The miners of Mount Kembla, oh! loudly how they shout
 Against this drop of ten percent, they're right without a doubt;
 In this happy, glorious country, man is treated like a Turk,
 Where the masters get the profit, and the miners get the work.
 We only want fair wages, we only want fair play,
 We know we ought to have a good dinner every day;
 But what are we to do when the butcher he comes round,
 If we let our masters drop two shillings in the pound.

Just ask a blessed woman what she is going to do,
 From the present price of wages we cannot save a screw
 With a lot of little children, with pieces, hungry teeth;

If they drop our wages, they must also drop the price of beef.
For every woman knows the task she has to meet,
With a lot of little mouths, and nothing much to eat;
But it can't be very different, it's very plain to tell,
Where the masters get the oyster, and the miners get the shell.

I would have you stick together, and have a good go in,
Be true to one another, and I'm sure you're bound to win;
Though money is so valuable and so is labour, too
The working man is worth whatever he may do.
And I hope that every woman will tell her husband too;
She will do her very best to help him to keep true;
They will be sure to raise the wine, and make the masters say
"The devil's in the women, for they never will give way."

Melinda Kendall wrote a number of poems, songs and articles for her local newspaper. 'The Colliers' Strike Song' seems to hark back to broadsides from earlier times. In this case it is probably borrowed from a song written about food riots, almost a century earlier, in 1795 in the town of Rochdale in England. When I added it to the Union Songs collection, Graham Seal pointed out to me that

It looks like an adaptation of a song or poem said to be related to the 3rd August 1795 food riot in Rochdale. If so, a good example of the continuity of folk tradition.

The Rochdale song Seal referred to has the chorus

The masters they are grumbling in country and in town
They want to starve the workers by keeping wages down.
Now in some parts of England the men were standing out
Against a great reduction and they're right without a doubt.
In this happy country, man is treated like a slave
When the master gets the profit and the worker gets the work.
You've no right to be happy, no right to be well fed,
If they drop our wages, they must drop the price of bread.

Melinda Kendall's song raises a number of questions for the folklorist. She was not a miner or from a mining family and as far as we know her song was not taken up by the mining community, and it has taken over a century for it to appear in print again. For a strike song this is not unusual, such songs are created to further the aims of a particular struggle, then their job is done. Their rediscovery however adds considerably to our understanding of the chain of events we call labour history. Whatever brightness they had in their own time shines again for the researcher. They may be considered 'missing links' in the evolution of industrial lyrical material, songs and poems that are reports from a changing society.

Industrial Australia coincides with its colonisation, an event not unrelated to the industrialisation of Britain. In this essay I will consider how the effects of the industrial revolution can be discerned in songs and poems that recorded or reported life in a changing society. Australian convict ballads and bush songs have often been seen as primary sources in the search for national identity particularly as seen from the viewpoint of Australian workers (Ward, 1958).

The evolution of poaching songs into convict ballads is unremarkable given that so many poachers were transported to Australia, and the poaching and convict ballads come from the same broadside publishers. Food riots in England, often highly organised by communities determined to force food prices down, and the Luddite riots, highly organised by communities determined to force shoddy goods out of the market, are regarded as underground precursors by labour historians of workers beginning the long guerrilla struggle that led to the legalisation of more permanent defence organisations, the trade unions. So secret were the Luddites that all we seem to have left is a few songs. (Munby, 1971)

Foster's Mill

Come all you croppers stout and bold
 Let your faith grow stronger still
 Oh the cropper lads in the County of York
 They broke the shears at Foster's Mill

The wind it blew the sparks they flew
 Which alarmed the town full soon
 And out of bed poor people did creep
 And run by the light of the moon

Around and around they all did stand
 And solemnly did swear
 Neither bucket nor kit nor any such thing
 Should be of assistance there

Around and around we all will stand
 And sternly swear we will
 We'll break the shears and the windows too
 And set fire to the tazzling mill

This was printed in Roy Palmer's *Poverty Knock*, where he gives the background:

This mill stood between Horbury and Ossett (near Wakefield) in Yorkshire. The attack took place on 9 April 1812, when a crowd of between three and six hundred, armed with firearms, hatchets and clubs,

destroyed gig mills, shear frames and cloth, together with a number of windows.

Luddite songs paint a picture of struggle not available from other sources, a picture that brings us closer to the thinking of the men and women involved in and early industrial struggle.

Taking a similar stance to the unknown writers who gave us the dozen or so Luddite songs was the poet Byron who in his maiden speech in the House of Lords on 27 February, 1812, made his sympathies to the Luddites known:

As the sword is the worst argument than can be used, so should it be the last. In this instance it has been the first; but providentially as yet only in the scabbard. The present measure will, indeed, pluck it from the sheath; yet had proper meetings been held in the earlier stages of these riots, had the grievances of these men and their masters (for they also had their grievances) been fairly weighed and justly examined, I do think that means might have been devised to restore these workmen to their avocations, and tranquility to the country.

Byron followed up on his speech with 'An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill' published in the *Morning Chronicle*, 2 March 1812 with lines like

Those villains, the Weavers, are all grown refractory
Asking some succour for Charity's sake
So hang them in clusters round each Manufactory
That will at once put an end to mistake

Men are more easily made than machinery
Stockings fetch better prices than lives
Gibbets on Sherwood will heighten the scenery
Showing how Commerce, how Liberty thrives

Some folks for certain have thought it was shocking
When Famine appeals, and when Poverty groans
That life should be valued at less than a stocking
And breaking of frames lead to breaking of bones

Collectors of industrial song and poetry like collectors of folksong and ballads prefer their collections to be free from obvious pieces from literate poets or composers of broadside ballads. Perhaps in Australia we are growing more used to the idea that what we call Australian folksong does often show signs of the published broadside or prove to be written by this or that poet. Certainly literacy was part of the cultural baggage that the convicts and colonial settlers brought with them from 1788. What is the case for folksong is even more the case for industrial song and poetry. Industrial song is the largely ignored voice of men and

women who work in industry. A.L. Lloyd, the folklorist most commonly associated with industrial song, writes 'By *industrial folk song* let us understand the kind of industrial songs made by workers themselves directly out of their own experiences, expressing their own interests and aspirations, and incidentally passed on among themselves, though this is no *sine qua non*. The kind of songs created from outside by learned writers, on behalf of the working class, is not our concern here.' (Lloyd, 1967, pp. 317-318)

There is an understandable caution among folklorists to not define industrial song outside of the accepted definition of folksong. George Korson who began collecting songs from mining communities in the United States in 1923 found his work took years to be recognised as folksong. Eventually he became President of the Folklore Society of America. Korson's collection was first published in the Journal of the mine workers union in 1924 and his relationship with the union made him wary of songs he thought were influenced by communist organisers, so there is no material like 'Which Side Are You On' or 'I Hate The Capitalist System' or 'Join The NMU' the Harlan County songs from the depression years that gained international recognition. Are we past that stage today? Can we broaden the definition of folksong enough to include most of the songs in *The Big Book of Australian Folk Song*? or those in the *Builders' Labourers Songbook*? So many of the songs in both books were written by known authors and follow a written tradition more often than an oral one.

In 1953 the poet Marjorie Pizer published *Freedom on the Wallaby* an anthology she refers to as the 'sixteenth volume' of anthologies dealing with Australian verse. She writes:

Freedom on the Wallaby is not just another new collection... its purpose is not merely to display the poetry written in Australia, but to give adequate representation (for the first time, we believe) to the poetry of the Australian realist and democratic tradition, our 'basic literary tradition' and the principal and most distinctive influence in our literature. Written for the delight of the common reader, this is the poetry that is profoundly concerned with the everyday life and problems of the common man. (Pizer, 1953, p. 7)

Pizer's anthology influenced a number of poets and songwriters associated with the folksong revival. Chris Kempster, for example, wrote a tune for Frank Willmot's poem 'Nursery Rhyme' in the early 1960s and much later a tune for Dorothy Hewett's 'Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod'.

Pizer begins her collection with a Prelude where she writes:

Three revolutions went into the making of Australia. The industrial and Agrarian Revolutions changed the face of eighteenth century England... The social disruptions caused by these changes in the country's economy created a vast and resentful army of unemployed which neither the mills nor the jails could contain... In 1776 the success of the American Revolution ended British rule and compelled the British Government to seek another remote region of the world to which to send her convicts... In January 1788, the First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay, carrying over one thousand souls, seven hundred and seven of them convicts. (Pizer, 1953, p. 22)

The anthology begins with an ironic poem 'Botany Bay' written by R.B. was first printed in the *English Magazine*, December 1786, and is probably the earliest poem to mention Botany Bay. Here are the final stanzas:

This garden of Eden, this new Promised land,
The time to set sail for will soon be at hand;
Ye worst of land lubbers, make ready for sea,
There's room for you all about Botany Bay

As scores of each sex to this land must proceed;
In twenty years time – only think of the breed;
Major Semple, should fortune much kindness display
May live to be King over Botany Bay

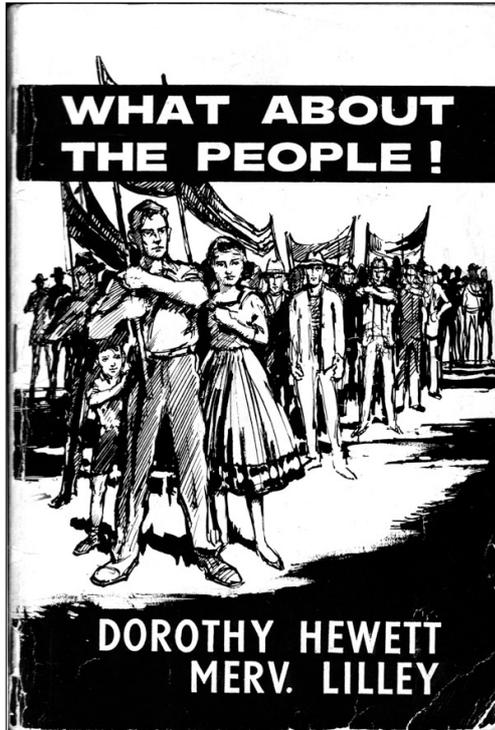
For a general good, make a general sweep,
The beauty of life in good order to keep,
With night-prowling hateful disturbers away,
And send the whole tribe unto Botany Bay.

Ye Chiefs who go out on this naval exploit,
The work to accomplish, and set matters right,
To Ireland be kind, call at Cork on your way,
And take some White Boys unto Botany Bay.

Commercial arrangements give prospects of joy,
Fair and firm may be kept ev'ry national tie,
And, mutual confidence, those who betray
Be sent to the bottom of Botany Bay.

The final poems in Pizer's collection include Hewett's Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod, written when Hewett as a young journalist was covering the extraordinary Aboriginal Pilbara strike that began on May Day in 1946, a struggle today recognised as a precursor to the land rights movement. As an industrial dispute it was firmly supported by the Fremantle branch of the militant Seamen's Union of Australia.

A number of Hewett's poems found their way into the folk revival repertory courtesy of Bill Berry, Chris Kempster and Mike Leyden. Did 'Weevils in the Flour' become a folksong when it was published in



Dorothy Hewett and Merv Lilley's What About the People!, first published c.1962.

Australian Tradition in 1965? It has certainly become an anthem of the labour movement in Australia, a staple of many union choirs. The origins of the song are quite hard to pin down but some of the stories relating to it are worth recording.

The song has an interesting history bound up with the folksong movement, Australian literature and Australian industrial history since the 1930s depression. A history so interesting that the song has accreted a fair amount of

folklore itself. The song was first published in August 1965 in the 'Sydney University Folk Music Society' folkscap collection 'Songs of our Time' and in November 1965 in the folk magazine *Australian Tradition*. The first recording of it on a 1965 LP of Australian contemporary songs came under threat of legal action from Australia's most powerful mining and steel making company BHP, the 'Big Australian'. In the next 20 years its influence spread to become a workers' anthem and to have its title borrowed for Wendy Lowenstein's pioneering oral history of the depression in Australia.

'Weevils in the Flour' started its journey to a song as a poem with the title 'Where I Grew To Be a Man'. It was published in 1963 in *What About The People!* Hewett's joint collection of 75 poems with her husband, Merv Lilley. The collection was published by the National Council of the Realist Writers Groups. Somewhere along its journey the poem got known by another name 'Island in a River'. Hewett wrote the poem in the 1950s based on depression experiences told to her by her friend Vera Deakin.

Folk singers in the 1960s were attracted enough to these poems to set a number of them to music. Kempster and Berry both wrote tunes for Hewett's 'The Sailor Home From The Sea'. They also wrote tunes for Lilley's poems, Berry for 'The Birchgrove Park' and Kempster for 'Cane

Killed Abel'. The Bush Music Club set Hewett's 'Ballad of Norman Brown' to the tune of an English mining song. Much later Kempster would set 'Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod' to music. In 1964 Leyden set four of Hewett's poems to music 'Atomic Lullaby', 'Sweet Song for Katie', 'Verwoerd, Verwoerd They Cry' and, most famously, 'Where I Grew To Be a Man' to which he gave the title 'Weevils in the Flour'. In May 1965 Leyden got to sing 'Weevils in the Flour' at a party for Pete Seeger who had expressed a desire to hear new Australian songs.

Perhaps that fact that so many of the Hewett and Lilley poems gained a tune should not surprise us. In their book the authors wrote 'A poem is a SONG that comes from the people to be given back to the people. Work... joy... pain... struggle... achievement... from these come the poems that are SONGS.' They also wrote: 'This is the folklore of the twentieth century.' and 'We live in an industrialised country. The old, slow, rollocking rhythm of horse and itinerant worker has given way the a harsh, staccato, jazzy beat of jackhammer, train, plane, dock and mechanised mine ... a great mass of mechanised, organised labour.' A contributing factor might be that Kempster, Berry and Leyden were all friends of Hewett and Lilley.

Can literature borrow from folksong? There is plenty of evidence that it can. Can folksong grow out of literature? Folklorists have argued the case back and forth for generations. I think 'Weevils in the Flour' is a handy example for those who argue the case for industrial folksong, folksong in the age of mass literacy, folksong whose boundaries includes urban lives and the concerns of the industrial era. 'Weevils in the Flour' deals with mass unemployment, the 'dole and stew', the greed and charity, the poisonous lead pollution and ends with the determination of industrial workers to change the way they've been treated, these are people who came through the depression and 'grew hard as iron on that black bread and sour'. The argument is made for social arrangement that no longer accepts that 'the bellies of the few' should be filled via 'the hunger of the many'.

'Weevils in the Flour' was first recorded on Gary Shearston's influential LP 'Australian Broadside' on the CBS label in 1965. Shearston had to change a line in the song because BHP threatened to sue the recording company. He replaced the phrase 'Stood the mighty BHP' with 'Stood a mighty factory'. An industrial giant interfering with an industrial song!

And just across the river
Stood the mighty BHP
Poured pollution on the water
Poured the lead of misery
And its smoke as black as Hades
Rolling hungry to the sea.

and

In those humpies by the river
 We lived on dole and stew
 While just across the river
 Those greedy smoke stacks grew
 And the hunger of the many
 Filled the bellies of the few

and

On an island in a river
 How the bitter river ran!
 It broke the banks of charity
 It baked the bread of man
 On that island in a river
 Where I grew to be a man

and the famous chorus

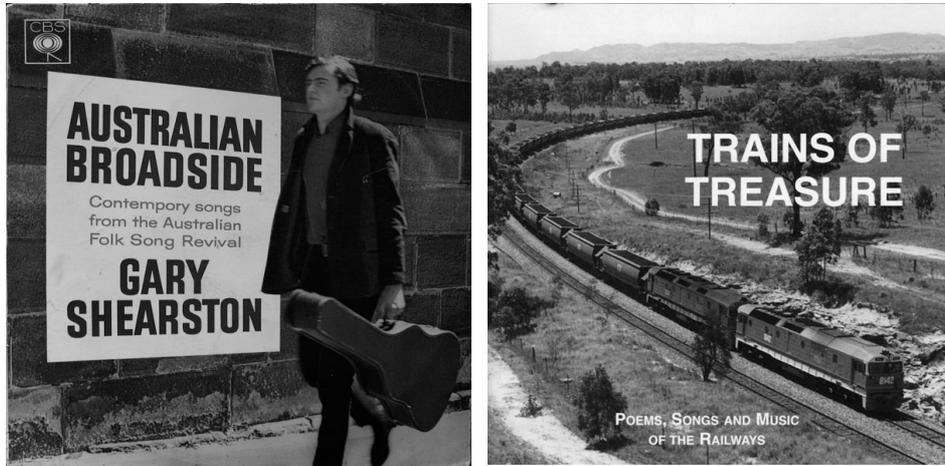
For dole bread is bitter bread
 Bitter bread and sour
 There's grief in the taste of it
 There's weevils in the flour

The Shearston recording alerted the Canberra student Bob Fagan to the song and it entered his growing repertory. Many years later Fagan found out more about the song from Hewett reflected in his introduction to the song at a National Folk Festival workshop:

Dorothy said that a young man had picked her up to take her to the University of Newcastle where she was going to be a Writer in Residence for a while, and as they were driving past the four stacks of the BHP steelworks there the young man said 'You know there was a poem written there on Kooragang Island by some unknown industrial worker in the 1930s.' And Dorothy said 'I didn't know whether to say I'm actually that unknown industrial worker and I wrote it on my kitchen table in Rockdale the 1950s—but I think she did tell him. Maybe we can accept this as evidence of a song accreting industrial folklore, literature evolving into folk song.

'Weevils in the Flour' became a favorite for folk singers and union choirs, a political anthem of sorts you would hear in workers pubs like the Criterion or the Sussex in Sydney's Sussex Street before they were demolished. Later it was sung by the workers occupying the Cockatoo Island Docks in Sydney Harbour before its closure.

The most famous recording of the song was on Declan Affley's 1968 debut LP 'Rake and Rambling Man' jointly published by Score in



Album covers for (left) Gary Shearston's Australian Broadside (1965), and (right) Brian Dunnett's Trains of Treasure, originally an audio cassette (1984) and later a cd..

Melbourne and Union Songs in Brisbane, and it was Affley I heard hush the crowded Sussex Street end of the Criterion Hotel in Sydney in 1975 when someone asked him to sing the song.

If Hewett's poem could reference a biblical (or Shakespearian as in 'the bitter bread of banishment') phrase like 'bitter bread' it also made popular the phrase 'weevils in the flour', words that Wendy Lowenstein would use for the title of her pioneering 1978 oral history of the depression.

In an interview in 2003, Merv Lilley told me:

I don't know whether I should tell stories about Dorothy's writing or not. I saw her write 'Island in a River'. She had said something she'd written to *Tribune* and Rex Chiplin had sent it back; he said it wasn't political enough. So she says 'I'll give them something political!'; she wrote 'Island in a River'.

Affley's recording of the song became part of the May 2009 Australia's Songs of Influence at Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House in Canberra. According to curator Dominique Sweeney the 29 were songs selected to make visitors ask questions like 'What makes people think about who and where they live? Do we share anything in common as a nation of people or are we regionally so disparate that the only thing we share in common is our elected representatives, like it or lump it? Do songs make a difference?'

It seems quite plausible that 'Weevils in the Flour' is destined to reach folksong status, regardless of what we know about its provenance.

Such songs and poems continue to be written by a large number of people. The first year of my online collection Union Songs coincided with the 1997–1998 'Patrick Dispute'. The epic struggle began with the secret attempt of the Howard Government to train ex-military personnel in Dubai to take over waterside workers jobs in Australian ports. By May Day 1998, when the Maritime Union of Australia victory had become clear, I had added 30 songs and poems from the community picket lines and support concerts to the Union Songs collection. By December 2009 the Union Songs collection had more than 680 songs and poems from over 269 authors. About half of them are Australian and most were written in the last 20 years. To paraphrase Pizer 'this is the poetry that is profoundly concerned with the everyday life and problems of workers and their families.'

Apart from the maritime industry, the building industry and the mining industry, all well represented among our industrial songs, there is also the lyrical material from the railways. For more than 30 years former railway worker Brian Dunnett has collected hundreds of items dealing with Australian railways. In 1984 'Trains of Treasure' a cassette of songs and poems was released as part of the Art In Working Life program run by the unions and the Australia Council. This collection has since been released as a CD. In September 2009 The Rail Tram and Bus Union ran a \$1000 competition for newly written songs and poems:

Whether you're doing the locomotion or on a train bound for nowhere,
there have been plenty of lyrics written about the iconic railways.

To continue the tradition, the Rail Tram and Bus Union award for poets and songwriters is running again, encouraging artists to capture the contemporary vibe of life on the Australian railways.

First prize is \$1,000 for the best original poem or song that is deemed to portray rail–Australian style.

Themes of the entries in the competition to-date are reflect the wide range of contemporary Australian railway issues – from support for new national railway infrastructure through to local issues and even railway romance," said RTBU spokesman Roger Jowett.

Railways still play an important part in the daily social and working life of the nation. Hardly a day passes without some story about life on our railway system featuring in some way in the media.

The competition resulted in over 30 new songs and poems covering many aspects of what railways mean to people who use them, remember them, or work in the industry. The competition has been incorporated into the 2010 Illawarra Folk Festival with a special concert and a series of special carriages on a 'Green Train' which will carry musicians and festival goers from Central Station in Sydney to the festival. The RTBU competition is the most recent example of an Australian union tradition to encourage members and supporters to add lyrical material to the labour movement's culture. In the case of railways early union journals are an invaluable source of industrial songs like this anonymous poem published in 1924 in the *Railway Union Gazette*:

'The Workman's Square Deal'

What does the workman want?

He wants his own,
The honest share of what his hands produce,
He craves no charity and begs no bone,
But only asks for freedom from abuse.

He wants goodwill,
But not at cost of justice and of life,
Not if it means that he must needs be still,
While others rob his baby and his wife.

He wants fair play and equal rights
And equal chance for all,
And privilege for none to steal or slay
Or force his weaker brother to the wall.

What does the workman want?

He wants his right,
Against the vain traditions of the law,
Against the sophistries of age and might,
Against religion's oft mistaken awe.

The workman wants the reign of commonsense,
He wants the true democracy of man,
Not any patronage nor all pretence,
Will hold him long to any other plan.

The common welfare is the workman's goal,
The common use of all the commonwealth,
The common rights of every common soul.
And common access to the springs of health.

And everyone a worker by and by,
His own employer, his own king and priest,
Nor any rich nor poor, nor low nor high,

When all the world monopolies have ceased.

In 1899 Henry Lawson (himself a railway worker for a time) wrote '2nd Class Wait Here'

At suburban railway stations - you may see them as you pass -
There are signboards on the platform saying 'Wait here second class':
And to me the whirr and thunder and the cluck of running gear
Seems to be forever saying, saying 'Second class wait here' -

Yes, the second class were waiting in the days of serf and prince.
And the second class are waiting - they've been waiting ever since,
There are gardens in the background, and the line is bear and drear,
Yet they wait beneath a signboard, sneering, 'Second class wait here'.

I have waited oft in winter, in the morning dark and damp,
When the asphalt platform glistened underneath the lonely lamp,
And the wind among the poplars, and the wires that thread the air,
Seemed to be for ever snarling, snarling 'Second class wait here'.

Out, beyond a further suburb, 'neath a chimney-stack alone
Lays the works of Grinder brothers, with a platform of their own;
As I waited there and suffered, waited there for many a day,
Slaved beneath a phantom signboard, telling all my hopes to stay.

Ah! a man must feel revengeful for a boyhood such as mine.
God! I hate the very houses near the workshop by the line;
And the smell of railway stations, and the roar of running gear,
And the scornful-seeming signboards, saying 'Second class wait here'.

There's a train with death the driver, and it's ever going past,
And there are no class compartments and we all must go at last
To that long white jasper platform with an Eden in the rear;
And there won't be any signboards, saying 'Second class wait here'.

In 1981, almost a century after the poem was written, Tony Miles, set the verses to music. Here is an example of another tradition, that of the folk revival enthusiast to seek out and bring poems from earlier times back into currency as song. This song is one of 140 Lawson poems that have been set to music almost all of them between 1949 (the year Kempster wrote his tune for 'Reedy River') and 2008 (the year of the publication of the second and enlarged edition of Kempster's book *The Songs of Henry Lawson*) coinciding with 59 years of the folk revival.

As we approach the end of 2009 perhaps it is worth summing up the year with 'Rotten To the Core' a song from the young Sydney group The Lurkers:

The banks are made of marble
With a guard at every door
Ripping off the workers

The farmers and the poor
Giving credit come and get it
Isn't that what banks are for
But they know you can't repay it
And they're beating down your door

Refrain:
And the banks are made of marble
With a guard at every door
And the monument of capital
Is rotten to the core

Down on dirty Wall Street
The truth is hard to find
Lay a dirty greenback down
You've got a dirty lie
Up on hollow Main Street
The truth is what you're told
A happy life it can be bought
A happy life is sold

The vultures at the top
Are in their towers of glass and steel
Hard hands at the bottom
They're scrounging their next meal
The ones who built the mansions
Pressed the suits and parked the car
They can't afford the rent
And so it's on the credit card

So lay your money down now
Don't you worry be at ease
Snort another line of credit
From the nice Chinese
Keep buying shoes and TVs
Pay it back another day
Everyone's got to keep shopping
Or they'll take your house away

Like folksongs industrial songs are changing as they must for a tradition to continue. This song harkens back to 'The Banks Are Made Of Marble' written by Les Rice, a farmer neighbour of Pete Seeger in 1950, and it is from such connections as this that we start to get a picture of a tradition. Recognising the tradition is like seeing the tips of icebergs and the songs scattered through this essay are buoyed up by hundreds of hidden industrial companions in what is an important heritage.

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