

Reedy River Review with folklore and some historical facts

by R.Dale Dengate

Recently a fine production of Reedy River was presented in an hour slot at Kiama Folk Festival. The acting and music was strong and convincing, I felt that the necessary editing from two and half hours by Tony Guyot produced a less dated version of the original, which had been produced in 1953. Dick Diamond wrote the play and selected songs that were known as traditional Australian ballads, He assumed most were anonymous and ‘brought to us by nameless singers’. Diamond said that he hoped to provide ‘an authentic setting for these songs and help to keep them alive’. However, 1891 had not been passed on by the singers from the past as Helen Palmer had written the words with Doreen Jacobs- Bridges setting it to music. Someone had handed the words to Dick on a roneoed sheet from their choir. Acknowledgement was given as soon as Diamond was alerted to the writers and their copyright. For other songs there are various versions that have been changed due to the ‘folk process’.

Sometime after 1953, on my way to school, I was fascinated by the sign: See Reedy River, painted in large letters on the sandstone cliff above the wharves of Darling Harbour, now demolished for Barangaroo. I didn’t realize that one of my teachers, Miss Palmer had written one of the songs. The Australian musical played in all eastern states and in Sydney, was played to packed houses for 6 months and revived many times. It was from the Bushwhackers band for these performances that the Bush Music Club was started. Many people were keen to learn the songs they identified as Australian and traditional.

One of the first outings John Dengate and I went on was to a performance in a back lane in Darlinghurst in 1963, and I gather an ASIO mole was present to record names. He certainly attended the 1960 performance held in the Waterside Workers Theatre. The last time I saw a production at New Theatre, Newtown John was delighted to be singing My Old Black Billy, along with many friends with whom he had sung Australian songs over the decades.

During the 1980s, Reedy River had toured overseas and the program included a glossary of terms. However, ‘billy’ was not included and a reviewer thought it referred to an English billy goat!

The scenes of bush dancing had been omitted from the Kiama production which reduced the actors to three women and six men playing the roles of people involved in the turbulent times of the shearers’ strikes. The unions were trying to get better pay and conditions for the workers in 1890s but this caused bitter divisions as the squatters and cockies complained of falling prices and hardship.

During this year, I have reported on some of the papers given at the National Folklore Conference at ANL in 2017. It flows neatly that my contribution to Mark Gregory’s paper on Australian traditional songs follows the review of Reedy River as some of the songs, I selected to help define the Australian folksong, came from this musical.

Banks of Condamine or Riverine, dates from 1894, and comes from a long line of traditional songs. The Banks of the Nile was noted in early 1800s. It deals with the

traditional story of separation between a couple with the man setting off for work or war or in the Australian versions to be a horse rider or shearer. The verses alternate between the couple and the woman begs to accompany her lover or husband. The version used in Reedy River was published by Vance Palmer and Margaret Sutherland. In 1950, they published a collection called Old Australian Bush Ballads to make ‘a songbook that could be used in a popular way’, so they had ‘restored’ some of the words or tunes to make them more singable[sic]. Although John Manifold expressed his horror at this practice he did a little’ restoration work ‘ to folk tunes also. John Dengate often wrote an extra verse or two and was often told they were the best verses!

The Ballad of 1891 by Palmer and Jacobs has already been referred to but it is worth noting further facts about their collaboration from Helen Palmer, in her article ‘Birth of the old bush ballad’ about its composition and folklore.

“In 1951, Doreen Jacobs and I wrote two songs about two radical highlights in Australian history - Eureka and The Ballad of 1891. There had been controversy in the air about song ballads and folk songs and the proper role of the peoples’ choirs that were forming with the aim of presenting militant and traditional songs.

So what was the folk tradition? Was it Vaughan William’s lush settings of waly-waly up the bank as in English folksong or Paul Robeson’s ‘Spirituals’ arranged for the concert platform. But Robeson said: The artist must take sides and elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice!”

A.L Lloyd had written of the militant popular origins of folksong, but what of folk song in Australia. 1952 Edgar Waters wrote his definition of ‘folksong and music’.

When Helen was doing some research for traditional ballads, she found most were the printed broadsheets of popular reciter type ballads. It was in this context that Helen and Doreen decided to see what could be done to ‘fuse some of the elements of the ballad traditions with a contemporary musical context. The words had to be spare, able to be sung and they had to tell a story. The music had to be vigorous, unmannered, unpretentious To test the system they went through the formalities of copyrighting both of them.

In concluding Mark Gregory’s investigation into the concept of Australian folklore as based on examples found in Trove, it would seem the Australian ballad was unashamedly written for oral transmission. It was to be shared and often sung with others. They were actually sung while relaxing after work, but were not work rhythm songs as in sea shanties. The itinerant lifestyles throughout the 1800s colonial period help spread the songs. Many were industrial songs or work related. Subjects included were union organisations with dire threats to ‘scabs and blacklegs’. Bosses and government authorities came in for a fair share of criticism. Food and cooks were important topics, but there was little female representation.

One might ask why so few songs were collected about women’s work and experiences? This needs another paper, but often women sang to rollicking rhythms while working. However, they were seldom itinerant workers, so their songs were not carried through the oral tradition nor collected as were the songs of men.