

BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

WALTZING MATILDA

When I landed in Sydney in 1969 I had no idea what Australia was all about. I had just come from Spain where I'd spent three years in Madrid, which was a bustling, crowded, very urban European city. Now I was ensconced on the north shore of Sydney harbour, in a suburb called Neutral Bay that was like living in a leafy garden overlooking a large lake. I was staying in a garage apartment behind a house that belonged to Wendy, a friend of Juanín's, my traveling companion. Wendy shared the house with two or three other girls, and all in all life was good. But was this *really* Australia? "Not really," said Fades, one of Wendy's many friends. "Well, it's the city version, for what that's worth. If you want to see the real Australia, you should head out to the country. Go bush."

Sometimes you can almost see the cup throwing the dice of destiny. As it happened, Juanín and I were at something of a loose end, and it soon transpired that Fades was extremely keen to leave town for a while. He was anxious to disappear until some financial misunderstandings in the city were resolved and certain people had calmed down a bit.

"Ah!" said Wendy. "Bloody typical. Whenever things get complicated you just fade away." She turned to Juanín. "*That's* why we call him Fades."

So, the next morning we were off. Fades had a large car—what Australians call a yank tank—and the three of us piled in and hit the road. Once we got well away from the city the distances were enormous and the land was flat all the way to the horizon. Sometimes we drove for hours without seeing another vehicle. We had very little money between us, so the plan was to look for work here and there along the way. That's what jackaroos do when they're not employed on a sheep or cattle station in the Australian outback.

Three or four weeks later we felt like veteran jackaroos—we'd swept out a huge warehouse, harvested barley, built (sort of) a couple of grain silos, worked the night shift at a milk processing plant, and done a few other menial jobs as well. We'd covered quite a bit of ground, but still hadn't seen what Fades referred to as the real Australia. Until one day on the road to Jerilderie—a handful of buildings huddled around a crossroads in the middle of nowhere—we saw what looked like a good place to stop for a picnic lunch. We turned off on a dirt track and drove towards a stand of tall trees. The trees cast their shade over a U-shaped bend in a gently meandering river. Fades sucked in his breath. "*This is it!*" he said. "This is a billabong! It doesn't get any more Australian than this!" Visibly moved, he started singing,



BACK IN TIME

...Continued

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

in a low, surprisingly melodious voice, what some consider to be Australia's unofficial national anthem:

*Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong
 Under the shade of a coolibah tree,
 And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled:
 You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me.*

We found comfortable places to sit down and eat our sandwiches, each leaning our backs against the smooth trunk of a coolibah tree, a kind of eucalyptus. *Waltzing Matilda* is a much-loved bush ballad written by Banjo Patterson in 1895. A swagman was a tramp who travelled the country looking for work. His swag was the bedroll and belongings he carried bundled on his back. For reasons that aren't entirely clear, his swag was called "Matilda," and "waltzing" was once a slang word for "walking." In the song the swagman makes a little fire on the banks of a billabong—just like the one where we were sitting—and boils water for tea in his "billy," short for billycan. A sheep comes to drink from the river and the swagman, seeing several free meals on the hoof, as it were, stuffs it into his food bag.

*Down came a jumbuck to drink at that billabong.
 Up jumped the swagman and grabbed him with glee.
 And he sang as he shoved that jumbuck in his tucker bag:
 You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me.*

Then the local landowner appears, accompanied by three policemen, who threaten to arrest the swagman for stealing the sheep.

*Up rode the squatter, mounted on his thoroughbred.
 Down came the troopers, one, two, and three.
 Whose is that jumbuck you've got in your tucker bag?
 You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me.*

But the swagman is a free spirit, a metaphor for Australia's defining sense of independence, and he tells the authorities they'll never take him alive.

*Up jumped the swagman and sprang into the billabong.
 You'll never catch me alive! said he
 And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong:
 You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me.*

We were all silent when Fades stopped singing. A faint breath of air stirred the leaves above our heads and rippled the surface of the water. The aboriginal words in the lyrics of the ballad echoed in my mind, evoking images of the people who had lived on these lands back in the Dreamtime, long before the Europeans arrived. My fellow jackaroo was right. This was the real Australia.

*Chorus:
 Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda
 You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me
 And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled:
 You'll come a-waltzing Matilda, with me.*

P.S. Listen to Slim Dusty's version of [Waltzing Matilda](#) here.