

And pranks no decent lartikin would play.
 I raise my window sash, and sit and wonder,
 While gazing upwards at the starry dome,
 Will men say in their hearts, that grand sky under —
 'If this be peace, God send us war at home?'

('Peace')

For, as Lawson's anthologist, Colin Roderick, summed it up: 'Lawson always praised war as the maker of nations, peace as the canker that rotted the national frame, and he welcomed the holocaust of 1914–18 as the fulfilment of his prophecies.'

To recapitulate: an investigation of Lawson's verse has revealed the following characteristics:

- 1 an organic concept of the nation
- 2 idealisation of manly virtues
- 3 hostility to finance capitalism
- 4 elitist notion of leadership
- 5 racism, including anti-semitism
- 6 militarism.

If these concepts demand a reinterpretation of Lawson, how much more do they demand a reappraisal of the Australia that Lawson has for so long epitomised?

INTERLUDE

NINE

Pianists

A good deal of the Australian legend depends upon folk-song and ballad which in turn call for portable instruments such as banjos, fiddles and bones. Something must be said about the 700 000 pianos reputedly brought into Australia during the nineteenth century.

The pianoforte, unlike its keyboard predecessors, did not require incessant tuning. Its function in the social life of the nineteenth century was analogous to that of the stereo system today. It provided popular entertainment and the only opportunity that most people had of hearing symphonies and operas, most of which were issued in piano arrangement.

It would be wrong to assume that the nineteenth-century piano was not a portable item. Despite its bulk, it was brought not only twelve thousand miles across the ocean but often another one thousand miles inland where it could become one wall of a hut. As Roger Covell has pointed out:

Middle-class values have rarely expressed themselves with more touching gallantry and tenacity than in the sacrifices and discomforts endured by countless families in order to bring this cumbersome symbol of higher values to their chosen home in small unstable ships and on grinding bullock drays.

Occasionally the piano was an instrument of oppression of the lower orders, as when Lady Hindmarsh forced six sailors to carry hers from the beach to Adelaide. Sometimes, the pres-

ence of a piano indicated that the good things of life were not to be reserved exclusively for those in authority. At least one convict, John Grant, brought a harpsichord with him into exile.

Australians took their pianos to Fiji in the 1870s in pursuit of fresh wealth and in the firm conviction that the Pacific was their pond. They had to sell them when things went bad.

The piano was the inevitable accompaniment of colonial hopes and despair. Richard Mahony's first desire for his wife was to buy her a piano — all her friends had one. On the day he made two thousand pounds on the stock market he fell asleep 'to the happy refrain: Now she shall have her piano, God bless her! ... the best that money can buy'. If its purchase gave Mahony pleasure, its eventual sale to his erstwhile servant upset him more than anything else. Not only did it signal the collapse of his old life; it reminded him forcefully of the upward social mobility that he had found so distasteful.

Pianos were often the final evidence of some past dream or splendour. It was as if to sell the piano was proof that it was all over. Alfred Joyce, who had started life as a cockney, ended his days at his Norwood property with the sale of his Collard & Collard. What more piteous sight could there be than Thomas Peel's 'miserable hut': 'Everything about him shows the broken-down gentleman — clay floors and handsome plate, curtains for doors and piano-forte, windows without glass and costly china'.

The piano was not the preserve of the middle classes. It was also the pinnacle of working-class aspirations. In the fulfilment of these hopes, Mahony's servant was not exceptional. In 1892 the young radical critic Francis Adams observed that the urban tradesman generally owned 'a small, iron-framed, time-payment piano, on which his daughters, returning well shod and too well clothed from the local "public school" ... discoursed popular airs with a powerful manual execution'.

A working class that could afford such luxuries wanted nothing to do with revolution, a fact which William Lane's novel *A Workingman's Paradise* made clear when the protagonist, a European socialist named Geisner, played 'The Marsellaise' on the piano. His playing did not invoke the cry 'to arms' but was a 'softened, spiritualised, purified' rendering, signifying the struggle in men's hearts.

The role of the piano in Australian history was not confined to its usefulness as a barometer of class consciousness. It was not a passive partner in the making of the Australian legend but an active participant, as an examination of the origins of 'Waltzing Matilda' will reveal.

The story began in Victoria in 1865 when Alice Macpherson played the piano for a bushranger, Morgan, the night before he was shot. Shortly afterwards, the Macphersons escaped from the Selection Acts and took up a new property, Oondooroo, in Queensland. In 1895, 'Banjo' Paterson holidayed there and heard the yarn that provided him with the theme for his ballad. But, argued John Manifold, 'nothing might have come of it if fate had not thrown a piano and singer in his way'. With the assistance of Alice Macpherson's daughter, Christina, Paterson produced the work that has come as close as any other to being a national anthem. Yet, despite its theme of sheep-stealing, it was written around a squatter's piano, where, Manifold tells us, 'A Thousand Miles Away', 'The Firehold on the Plain' and 'The Eumerella Shore' were probably also written.

While it is true, as Russel Ward pointed out, that 'Waltzing Matilda' epitomises his mythical Australian's attitude to authority, it became 'the most popular of Australian folk-songs' only because it received the imprimatur of Thomas Wood, a pianoforte examiner from the Trinity College of Music. Wood's visit took place in 1932. Before then, 'Waltzing Matilda' had been considered impolite. But what, asks Covell, 'could be more respectable than an English music examiner?' Thus we are forced to ask: what kind of nationalism is it

that must await the visit of an English music examiner before its anthem can become accepted? And what kind of radicalism is it that allows such a prominence to pianos?

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