Death Watch: Reading the Common Object of the Billycan in 'Waltzing Matilda'

MICHAEL FARRELL
University of Melbourne

This essay reads A.B. Banjo Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda' through the presence of the common and iconic object of the billycan: a presence that is significant—and ironic. The billy 'may be heard' (or read) without being particularly noticed; but when we pay closer attention, interesting things emerge. Its relationship with the Swagman isn't simply instrumental: the billy doesn't perform as might be expected. It doesn't do its job. Yet it has a poetic role to play, an ironic one, and a thematic one—that invokes the contemporary concerns of the environment, the workplace, and Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations.

A billy is that thing that, for instance, boiled in 'Waltzing Matilda'. Or did it? If you know 'Waltzing Matilda' (if you know Australian literature) you know the billy's there, but why? Is it there for reasons other than of plot or verisimilitude: to paint an authentic picture of bush-life? A picture that requires a break for its characters, a break characterised as an Australian tea-making ritual? In examining the billy in Australian ballads, a thematic consistency begins to emerge. Tea is one of the themes, but a fairly passive one. The themes that come through most strongly are of life and death, and spirit —of the human protagonists, but also of the billy itself. To this extent the billy can be read as a metonym for Australia, that of the life, death and spirit of the nation. The billy is an object—a *can*—that evokes life and death. Here, a Freudian pun is hard to avoid—the billy is *uncanny*.

The billy can be considered a psychoanalytic object in Lacanian terms also. A phenomenological object can be defined as one that can be shared: not only is the billy not shared, as it would be if it was really hospitable (neither are the resources of the land, as represented by the jumbuck), but the other 'differential features' of Lacan's 'Object (a)', as outlined by Jean Allouch (1998), correspond with the features of the billy as I read it. Allouch's list of features is as follows: 'non-mirrorable, non-exchangeable, non-communicable, non-common, non-shareable, non-utensil, non-removable, non-quotable, non-socialised, correlative of fantasy, anterior to the common object, related to loss' (62-3). (An opposing list of features: 'mirrorable' etc, makes up a 'phenomenological' list.) I will argue that the billy is not useful in the practical sense, that is, it is *not* ultimately a utensil; and is strongly related to loss. The billy in 'Waltzing Matilda' is opposed to the common phenomenological object of the billy. The notion of the billy's 'non-mirrorability' is particularly suggestive. (A comparison between 'Waltzing Matilda' and the Narcissus myth is made later in this essay: this reading suggests that the Swagman reflects the billy rather than the other way round.) The steaming non-reflective billy offers no image, nor popularly, is it seen (for itself); the drama of 'Waltzing Matilda' is in one sense the billy's driving of the Swagman to the billabong—to suicide.

The following is an assessment of the significance of the billy itself, in its context: Australian literature. Billy tea features in a satirical four-line description of Australian literature written in 1899 by R.H. Croll:

> Whalers, damper, swag and nose-bag, Johnny cakes and billy tea,
> Murrumburrah, Meremendicoowoke, Youlgarbudgeree,
> Cattle-duffers, bold bushrangers, diggers, drovers, bush racecourses,
> And on all the other pages horses, horses, horses, horses.
>
> (McAuley 7)

In a poem, the 'billy' is foremost a word. To read the billy as an image implies an interpretation: that the image in question functions as a symbol, metaphor, metonym etc. If we notice the billy as a textual image, it might suggest the Australian character: 'the "typical Australian" is a practical man, rough and ready... He is a great improviser' (hence the billy) and 'very hospitable,' (Ward1-2). Though at times I rely on sources from outside an Australian literary context, I do so in the spirit of the swagman and the billy itself: I improvise with what is at hand and seems useful.

In an Australian creative context more generally, we might think of the paintings of Frederick McCubbin and Tom Roberts, where the billy appears to evoke bush hospitality and recreation. But this is only an impression: a closer reading negates it, suggesting rather the billy's relation with oppression, despair and death. (Consider McCubbin's 'Down on his Luck' (1889) where the billy lies on its side; these themes are explored more explicitly, and in contemporary fashion by Arthur Boyd (e.g. 'Kneeling Figure with Canvas and Black Can' 1973) and Juan Davila ('The Arse End of the World, 1994).) In other words, the billy functions ironically: it doesn't boil and it doesn't provide tea; its usefulness is rather as an ironic plot device.

A billy must of course be made before anything can be made in, or of it. This making happens 'off-page'. What is a billy and what gives it signifying power? It's a kind of metal bucket most commonly used as a kettle or saucepan, or to carry water. It can be bought, but its popularity lies not just in its versatility but in its easy and cheap manufacture, requiring only a used food can and a piece of wire for a handle. It is also much lighter than an iron kettle, making it easier to carry (Richardson49). It's no surprise then that it's a common image in the literature and painting of colonial bush life.

My argument is that the billy is more (and less) than a useful implement—and more than a kitsch remnant of a romanticised past–but a potent, troubling, material word-image. Though depicted knowingly, consciously and ironically by both writers and painters, image- and object-based readings have been neglected for the most part by critics, in favour of thematic, stylistic, theoretical and historico-ideological readings. (Wright,1965 McAuley, 1975; Taylor, 1986; Kane, 1996) The readings of the billy in Baynton's 'Squeaker's Mate,' by Ian McLean (1998 61) and by Elizabeth Webby in her introduction to Baynton's *Bush Studies* (1989 7) are rare examples, and the only examples I've found that attend to the billy. It's not that critics ignore content, but that they read it as support

for a theme or ideology. Lawson's poems are read for their support of nationalism (McQueen 96-108), 'Waltzing Matilda' as coded worker's propaganda (Magoffin3). These are metonymical readings: the poem is taken as part of a larger whole. My own concern with metonymy is within the poem: what part does the billy play; what are the implications? The billy's promise is in its apparent purpose: that of making tea. This promise is rarely fulfilled in the poems that feature it. How large a part does the billy play, can it be larger than the text it is in?

Though it seems like a small and humble object—it is 'unobjectionable'—my object is to object to the way it's (not) seen. The billy is a useful object–supposedly and figuratively. Can the billy be a theme in itself? How *exactly* does the billy function? Is it as stable as it seems? The main supports for this reading of the billy, in tune with an emphasis on the material, are the words themselves. I am reading the billy through (the words of) the ballad 'Waltzing Matilda', as much as reading the ballad through an examination of the functioning, or performing, of the billy. I rely in particular on two dictionaries, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* and the *Macquarie Concise Dictionary*. For example, the word function is from the Latin *functio* meaning 'perform' (*Concise Oxford*, 399).[1] This alludes to the billy having the ambiguous agency of an actor: it performs within the text, but is directed by the writer. 'Stable' is also from Latin: *stabilis*, meaning 'stand' (1032). The person making tea might crouch by the fire–the billy stands; but sometimes it hangs over the fire, or is not on the fire at all. Yet 'stand' has another connotation of letting tea stand, to brew and cool.

Words are not merely containers of meaning (or sound) however, but are made of letters; these at times form words within words. 'Stable' contains 'able' from the Latin *habilis* handy, from *habere* to hold (2). This says more about the billy: at least in theory. How handy; how 'holdable' is it? The billy's stability may ironically contradict its handiness or effectiveness. If it's so stable that it doesn't boil it's not very handy for making tea. If it's *so* stable, it doesn't cool—which makes it not very 'holdable' either. Though materially present in the poem, 'able' (*and* 'table') are absent from the semantic scene. The concept of ability ('a billy tea') suggests (on the basis of sound at least) a punning series of possibilities: 'possibility' is one itself, and, more (eco)critically, 'sustainability' is another. Moving from pun to anagram, we might consider that 'stable' can be reformed as 'bleats', the sound of the fatal jumbuck: or a review of the Swagman singing, or the many Australians that followed him.

An actor should have a name: and when we consider 'Waltzing Matilda', it's only the swag of the Swagman that has a name—'Matilda'—though 'billy', traditionally a diminutive of William, is of course a name as well as an object. The Swagman, the squatter, the troopers, horses and jumbuck remain anonymous. (Though, in a sense, 'The Jolly Swagman' has become this swagman's name.) According to Judith Butler a name (even a derogatory one) gives 'a certain possibility for social existence'; it may 'paralyse the one it hails, but it may also produce an enabling response' (2). The word 'billy' suggests the 'possibility' of the social–a sharing of tea–but in 'Waltzing Matilda' and other ballads, the naming of the billy can be read as paralysing: it is, in Butler's terms,

non-'performative': or more precisely, performs a 'paralysing' act, which has consequences for the Swagman.

Butler refers to the 'ordinariness' of being 'called this or that', but then asks, 'why do the names that the subject is called appear to instill the fear of death and the question of whether or not one will survive?' Butler proposes then, that 'One comes to "exist" by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. One "exists' not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, by being *recognizable*' (4). The question of who or what is the subject of 'Waltzing Matilda' is the question of this article. The naming by Paterson (discussed later) of the Swagman suggests that recognition on the part of the troopers, and the Swagman's fear of recognition may be sublimated in Paterson's narrative. The billy's survival perhaps relies (paradoxically as the billy *is* named) also on not being recognised. The swag too, with its explicit name of 'Matilda' must depend on not being recognised as a German camp follower (Richardson 76-7)—or how could the ballad 'Waltzing Matilda' itself have survived (thrived) as an emblematic quasi national anthem through two wars against Germany? The ballad's success is a major (national) irony—and the relation to war gives it a further deathly resonance.

'Waltzing Matilda' is perhaps the most recognisable Australian song—the song's players: swag, Swagman, billy, squatter, troopers and jumbuck are recognisable because of the song's long-term popularity. The meaningfulness of the text comes from the familiarity listeners and readers have with the text itself, though it can be read (as per Magoffin later in this article, as a parable of work relations). It is its own 'hypogram': 'a place that antedates the text' (Riffaterre 46). Yet despite this familiarity the billy is not actually recognised for what it is or does. Though this article is concerned largely with semantic and narrative irony, it could be argued that the billy (a handmade object) as symbol represents making (*poeisis*: *COD* 790), resisting the notion of the ballad as a simple telling.

The billy can be considered ironic according to both definitions of 'irony'. 'Irony' can be either an 'expression of one's meaning by language of opposite or different tendency...ill-timed or perverse arrival of event or circumstance in itself desirable, as if in mockery of the fitness of things' or 'of or like iron' (530). The billy, in its failure to boil, opposes its 'meaning' and expected 'tendency'. Its boiling is 'ill-timed,' 'perverse'. As a tin object it is 'like iron'. It is an ironic icon for these reasons. But failure itself has an iconic status in Australia, embodied by the failures leading to the dying of thirst of iconic explorers Burke and Wills, of the capture and hanging of national icon and bushranger, Ned Kelly, and of the hallowed failure of the Anzac campaign at Gallipoli in WWII (Hughes, 1984 222-3). This erases (or adds another level of) irony, in that we aren't surprised by the iconicising of failure in Australia.

The recurrence of the billy in Australian ballads and poems is an ironic history, a history that plays with the two categories of irony, setting up patience ('waiting') as a national virtue. The billy is an ironic symbol of redemption: it achieves iconic status, transcending the status of rubbish (old jam tin) by being burnt. But the burning is no sacrifice, no act of proxy (but it *is* a further irony): the fire does not consume the billy–it is the Swagman

who is doomed. In ‘Waltzing Matilda’, the billy acts as witness or silent narrator of the meta story, its silent presence signifying a tale of disaster.

While a billy is bubbling, boiling appears to signify life, but it is also the end point. In other words, life (and, as we’ll see, death), is what happens while we wait for the billy to boil. In the ballads the billy is a figure of romance, a symbol of democracy and a harbinger of death, and in its most emblematic instance, in ‘Waltzing Matilda,’ it figures all three of these.

In Paterson the billy seems to merely add to the verisimilitude, whereas in Lawson it is a revolutionary symbol: ‘And wherever go the billy, water-bag and frying-pan, / They are drafting future histories of states!’ (Vol. 2 9).

‘Waltzing Matilda’ is the best-known billy text, yet its narrative is mysterious. Recent research shows that it has a back story that brings it closer to Lawson’s poems of unrest (Vol. 1 400-1, Vol.2 9). It is the (ironic) functioning of the billy in ‘Waltzing Matilda’ that the narrative hinges on, and it is the image of the billy that links Paterson’s song to Lawson (rather than the more obvious sheep or squatter).

The billy features in a number of anonymous ballads (Stewart and Keesing 223, 225-6, 226-8, 236). The billy’s inventor is anonymous, and is associated with the swagman, a figure of anonymity. Most of the ballads mention or are voiced by a swagman, either as the possessor of—or in tandem with—a billy. The exceptions imply swagmen (Lawson, Vol.2 9) or, in one case, the narrator is a de facto swagman: a camping, travelling bushman who happens to ride a horse (Stewart and Keesing, 236). The swagman is emblematic of the bush in the colonial period. He is an improviser: of billies, of his swag, of living (Richardson 49-50).

The billy is a rhetorical figure in both the Lawson poems, but in ‘Waltzing Matilda’ it is used as a plot device. It is a quasi *deus ex machina*. Although its tardy boiling can be read as the cause of the Swagman’s misfortune, it is itself displaced by the billabong (and/or the swag-dance in the ballad’s refrain). It is a quasi symbol (of hospitality), and a virtual symbol (of death, Australia). In Freudian terms, it could be read (as of course could any chorus) as the ‘return of the repressed’–as could the figures that come ‘up’ (from the unconscious?) or ‘down’ (from God?) (Freud, ‘Uncanny’ 368).

‘Waltzing Matilda’ uses the assonance of both ‘boiled’ and ‘billabong’ to provide (linguistic material) support for the ‘billy’. If we think of ‘ballad’ and ‘billy’ as words in an assonantal series, two words that fall between them are ‘billed’ and ‘billet’. Considering the latter term first, the temporary home of ‘billet’ suggests not only the camping associated with billies and swagmen, but the billy’s temporary home within the colonial ballad.

Let’s stop (camp) awhile and consider a definition of the other kind of ‘camp’: ‘To be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits’ (Meyer 319). I don’t quote this in order to negate my project—

in fact my argument is that the marginal billy merits a greater commitment—but to point to the campness of Australian national culture, and its mythologising of the marginal swagman, bushranger, explorer, digger and 'battler'. Meyer's context is that of homosexual art and the law. But the aptness of his definition suggests the richness of a queer (or camp) reading of Australian figures: consider for example, the campness (exploited by Simon Hunt in his Pauline Pantsdown parody) of Pauline Hanson, or the Ned Kelly dancers at the Sydney Olympics. 'Waltzing Matilda' is an anthem of the marginal, but there is something funny about the hearty mode in which it is sung, as if it could be a serious national anthem. As if we were a nation of ratbags, another national figure, and synonymous with the swagman.[2]

The billy has other homes in poems, stories, paintings; also in advertisements (Cozzolino) and cartoons (Rolfe). 'Billed' indicates there's a price to pay. Who pays it—and what for? Not for drinking tea, apparently. Swagmen often received shelter and provisions free (Ward 79). The Jolly Swagman pays with his life;[3] and the threat of death (to 'tyrants') is in Lawson: 'if blood should stain the wattle' (Vol. 1, 400-1). Swagmen typically have few possessions. To think of them as dispossessed would be romantic (colonially ironic) in the context of the colonial dispossession of Aboriginal people. The poems generally present a man, his swag and billy, in an empty space by a campfire. 'Waltzing Matilda' is an exception, having a cast of six. The drama is not a settling one though: it's no tableau, and can be seen as a poem of process, a series of gestures towards the theme of emptying (Kelen 142-50). The song could be seen as an instance of karmic economy, following the theft of land from Indigenous people, but this reading would ignore the particularities of this instance. The billy can be figured as a site or bank from which things (tea, death, nationalism, irony, despair etc.) may or may not flow.

In her introduction to *Old Bush Songs,* Nancy Keesing distinguishes between the 'true Australian bush ballad (with a definite story and written usually later and at a distance from the events described) and the old bush song (sometimes telling a tale but incidentally to its vocal qualities)' (ix). The exemplary writer of the 'true Australian' ballad has elsewhere been ascribed to both Paterson (King vii) and Lawson (Lee 78). The chapters of *Old Bush Songs* are divided by theme rather than form: ballads and songs are not explicitly distinguished. I am not so concerned with this distinction – which, by Keesing's definition, is 'Waltzing Matilda'? 'Waltzing Matilda' is a song, yet is included in poetry anthologies (Hall, Dutton) and collections of Paterson's poems. It is one of the few songs in *Old Bush Songs* still regularly sung. No musical notation is included in the book, and though occasionally the names of the tunes are given, most of these are now obscure: we read the texts as poems.

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A.B. (Andrew Barton) or Banjo Paterson (1864-1941), 'dispossessed squatter's son' and best-selling Kipling fan (Ward 4, 207, 242) 'is the chief folk poet of Australia,' a reputation earned through his anthologising, but more so from the popularity of 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'Waltzing Matilda' (Wilde 213-5). The billy has been popularised through the song, though perhaps the word 'billy' is more recognisable than

the billy itself. As noted above, it's potentially a symbol for bush hospitality (Ward 78-81)–but as the line goes a lot can happen while you wait for the billy to boil. 'While the billy boils' as a phrase and concept had cultural currency in the late nineteenth century—it was used as a title for both a McCubbin painting and for Lawson's popular short story collection.

In 'Waltzing Matilda' a 'Jolly Swagman' is visited by a 'jumbuck' (sheep), and a posse comprising a 'squatter on his thoroughbred' (land and sheep owner on valuable horse) and 'troopers' (police, presumably on less valuable horses). In the end the Swagman drowns in a 'billabong' without any indication that the billy boils (Paterson 67-9). No one actually waltzes (dances, or figuratively, walks) anywhere with anyone–unlike Ned Kelly, the 'billycan poet' (Hughes 160) who 'dance[d] with a policeman at a fair' (Molony 202).

The national ballad promises a party but only delivers the ironically jolly threat to passersby that they'll 'come a-waltzing Matilda': the figure of waltz having progressed from 'walk' to 'die'. The song is a mockery of Australian hospitality. Sydney May's description of 'Waltzing Matilda's composition is a mild parody of the narrative of the song: 'They arrived at afternoon tea time at Mrs Riley's home. The tea was ready, but they would not have it. They sat around the piano in the drawing room—the tea grew cold, the shadows lengthened, the lamps were lit—the song was completed.' (Magoffin 25). The Swagman poses as host of an outdoor tea party, but when threatened with the prospect of becoming a guest of Australia, he chooses death over detention, death being the party we all attend eventually. But the version where he 'waits' is a modernised one (Paterson 68-9). In the earlier versions, as quoted in Paterson (67), '... he sang as he looked at the old billy boiling'; while Stewart and Keesing (243) have '... he sang as he looked at his old billy boiling'. The semantic possibilities of the earlier versions are: he's caught up in his singing, perhaps wants to get to the end of the song; he's contemplating the question of the song ("Who'll come...?"); 'boiling' is the more ambiguous use of the word: he's watching the billy in its process of boiling, but the water has not actually boiled yet. The introduction of *waiting* suggests that the song's revisers supported this interpretation. The Swagman watches the surface of the water; there is more below the surface of the song. According to Muecke, this is where irony comes from: beneath the surface of a situation, a text (5).

Ironies abound, both in the text and the performance. As mentioned above, this is Australia's national song but its title is German-derived. Stewart and Keesing drop Paterson's subtitle (that also serves as a translation) of 'Carrying a Swag'. It's a popular song with obscure terms. A song that is also a ballad and a poem. The questions of both the chorus and the troopers are rhetorical and ironic. The first suggests a listener in the audience might come 'a-waltzing' with the dead Swagman; the troopers know the jumbuck isn't the Swagman's. The song ironically celebrates rebellion while simultaneously upholding law and order. A crucial irony—although it's one that may go unnoticed by reader or performer (a further irony)—is (knowing) that the billy will never boil.

There are several differences between the Stewart and Keesing version and other versions.[4] 'Billabong' is singular as in the manuscript, but Paterson (67) and Richardson (68-9) have 'billabongs' in the copy of an alternate manuscript version. The argument regarding the plural revolves around whether it is a particular billabong or not (Richardson 73).

In the original versions the Swagman isn't 'Jolly' at all: the word 'jolly' having been added by Marie Cowan for a Billy Tea advertisement (Richardson 85-6). The context of advertising is yet another reason for 'Waltzing Matilda' to be a national song: 'Australia' was an ad before it was a nation, not only in the sense of Australians selling it to themselves for identity purposes, but in explicit advertising to potential migrants, and in conflict with the messages given to potential criminals (White 29-46; Frost 199-200). The word 'jolly' was also used in a bush ballad about assisting the Kelly gang, 'We're the Jolliest Lot of Thieves' (Stewart and Keesing 45); another ballad runs: 'For as gambler and thief/ Has brought me to grief/ In it there is nothing so jolley,' (4). The word 'jolly' (from the Old French *jolif*: 'gay, pretty' (*COD* 541)) forces a disturbing enjoyment on this commercial song about a suicide. The word is more British than Australian, which gives drinking tea extra support, but gives a particularly nasty cast to the story behind the song–if taken literally, as the enjoyment derives from the death of a European (see following); it can also be read then as the linguistic triumph of English as the Australian language, or at least, on a micro level, of 'jolly's triumph over its origin as *jolif*. After so many years and renditions the 'jolly' has become generic, abstract and somewhat archaic. It evokes another generic, mythical figure, also associated with fireplaces: Santa Claus. Paterson compares Santa Claus and a swagman in the parable of hospitality 'Santa Claus in the Bush' (94-8). The most common vernacular usage of 'jolly' is that meaning 'slightly drunk' (*COD*, 541). It gives added motivation to the tea drinking: strong, sobering billy tea. If this is why the Swagman is Jolly, it could explain why he doesn't notice the squatter and troopers arrive, and why he jumps into shallow water rather than attempt a verbal defence. He'd drown more easily too. In Cowan's version the jumbuck becomes 'jolly' too—which would explain the ease of its being caught.

The later version has 'grabbed him *with* glee' (Paterson, 68). The song has already lost the original of '"You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with we!"' spoken by the troopers (changed from 'policemen': 'for poetic advantage') (Richardson 78). Troopers are connected with the billy through parody, their helmets (when off) resembling billies—at least they do in Sidney Nolan's Kelly series painting 'Morning Camp' (Rosenthal, 2002 66). Richardson writes that singers preferred 'with' and didn't like 'we' (78-9). The different hands and mouths that went into creating the contemporary 'Waltzing Matilda' give it a collaborative, multi-authored aspect, and make it part of oral tradition. The song has also lost 'darling' (68). 'Darling' as an address has become old-fashioned, but its removal also lessens the affective aspect, repressing the troubling *de facto* relationship between man and swag, and erasing the correspondence with the 'darling old Billy' of the 'The Billy of Tea' (Stewart and Keesing, 236). This leaves it as a dance (of death).

There are other troubling elements to the song that have been muted by time and cultural pressure. Richardson outlines an argument derived from Magoffin that the song describes

more than a tragic, romantic and emblematic encounter between underdog and authority—instead it can be directly linked to a particular incident between shearers and squatters, involving the burning of a woolshed and the beginnings of the labour movement.

In Queensland in 1891, shearers went on strike for better pay and conditions. In 1894, they did more than strike: they burnt down woolsheds on several stations, the final one in September on the Macphersons' 'Dagworth' (Richardson 51-3, 57). Banjo Paterson visited Dagworth the following year. There he met Christina Macpherson, who wrote the music for 'Waltzing Matilda'. Richardson suggests Christina's brother Bob served as the model for the squatter (19). Paterson would have heard about the suicide (by gun) of arson suspect Frenchy Hoffmeister at a nearby billabong; there had also been two recent drownings in the area (64-7). ('Waltzing Matilda's tune is thought to be derived from a ballad by Robert Tannahill–who drowned in a lagoon in 1810 (106-7)). It seems that 'Waltzing Matilda' was informed by this backdrop of unrest. Richardson refers to Magoffin's reading of the song as political allegory, and his provocative suggestion that Paterson was actually involved in negotiations between the shearers and squatters (89-94). If so, it is a much more coded expression of industrial tension than Lawson's. This could be discretion on Paterson's part: not just because of his close relationship with the Macphersons, but because of the threat of prosecution for sedition that Lawson had received (91).

A post-WWII poem, that is to some extent a rewriting of 'Waltzing Matilda', supports this reading. A connection with (class) war can be made between 'Waltzing Matilda' and John Manifold's poem about Learmonth (Stewart, 1968 116-8). This reading would identify the squatters and troopers as Germans, rather than the usual English squatter and Irish troopers. Conversely, the only man that can be identified as the Jolly Swagman was the German migrant Samuel 'Frenchy' Hoffmeister. Frank Hardy described Hoffmeister as a 'Bavarian anarchist' (Magoffin 11). Paterson doesn't actually name Hoffmeister or say he based the Swagman on him, but implies it by saying Hoffmeister was 'the man picked up dead'. That he is the Swagman is implied by the context. Hoffmeister was one of those involved in the burning of the Dagworth woolshed and was found shot later that day, 'probably murdered,' (Magoffin 7, 34). According to Magoffin, the word 'drowning' was omitted and 'You'll never take me alive! said he' substituted by unionists (11). The later version *implies* drowning only. Hoffmeister's 'Frenchy' nickname expresses a typical Australian irony towards Europe. Both words in the phrase 'waltzing matilda' also derive from German (Richardson 76-7).

Manifold wrote, 'I could as hardly make a moral fit/ Around it as around a lightning flash' (118). The same could be said of 'Waltzing Matilda,' its ambiguity somehow underpinning its mass appeal. The modern or jingle version of 'Waltzing Matilda' was written in 1903 (Richardson 85). The song's use of repetition means it is less reliant on rhyme, emphasising instead the repetition of elements: Swagman, billabong, jumbuck, tuckerbag, and billy. Its improved singability makes it an advertisement? for itself, and for those key words that may have been forgotten without the song.

As noted earlier, the billabong displaces the billy. (This can be read as a decivilising move, and contra to the eighteenth-century Scots move of 'elevating' street ballads 'to the tea-table', as described by Newman (52). There is (in the Swagman) no consciousness of guilt 'that Freud calls civilization' either (Newman 223). In line three, 'billy boiling' is offered as a rhyme for billabong. There's a rhythmic shift in the later version: 'And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled'. There's still the assonance or half-rhyme of 'billa-' with billy, the consonance of the series of words ending with 'd': 'watched', 'waited' and 'boiled'. The obscure image 'leading a water-bag' has been dropped. 'Tucker-bag' is left to rhyme with itself (while referring back to 'swag-'); ditto 'billabong', losing the half-rhyme of 'darling,' as well as the synonym of 'water-hole'. This version also adds the repetition of 'jolly' (Paterson 68-9). At the end of the song the Swagman gives up on the billy; the billabong boils or bubbles with his last breath: and perhaps still bubbles with his voice. 'Ghost' is sometimes replaced by 'voice' in the second last line (Richardson 79). 'Voice' is the more ambiguous and radical option; it doesn't imply death as 'ghost' does. A mythical figure, it is possible he lives on in the billabong, or else the line 'You'll never catch me alive' is ironic, and implies he's already dead, a zombie or spirit figure. This is another correspondence with Lawson's 'The Men Who Made Australia', which includes the lines: ''Tis the dead that we have buried, and our great unburied dead, / Who are calling now...' (Vol. 2 9). Geoff Willats-Bryan, manager of the Waltzing Matilda Centre in Winton, explicitly links 'Waltzing Matilda' to the Australian spirit: 'the song is one of the things that keeps it alive' (Richardson 104). And of course the Swagman has died thousands of times before in each rendition of the song.

'He sang as he watched' suggests a modern, self-conscious lyric model. The Swagman is not singing directly of the billy–he is not a descriptive or pastoral poet. He is a balladeer within a ballad. The word 'ballad' has its roots in Provençal: *balada* meaning dancing-song. Thus 'Waltzing Matilda' is an exemplary ballad, fitting both the usual meaning: 'simple song, esp. sentimental or romantic or narrative composition of several verses' but also conforming to the original meaning, 'dancing song' (*COD* 66). 'Troubadour' is also of Provençal origin: 'lyric poet in S. France etc. in 11^{th}-13^{th} c., singing in Provençal mainly of chivalry and gallantry'. This is partly true of the Swagman, but the greater part of the gallantry of the song is enacted rather than sung by him, which makes Paterson the troubadour—and to an extent all singers of the song as it travels the world. Paterson and the Swagman collaborate on the 'Waltzing Matilda' ballad. But the refrain 'Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?' *appears* gallant: an invitation to dance. The original Provençal word was *trobador*, from *trobar*: find, invent, compose in verse (1150).

The Jolly Swagman—as representative swagman—finds a billabong and a jumbuck, composes a swag as well as a song, and invents a billy. The Swagman has a stronger claim on 'troubadour' than Paterson. Yet this troubadour isn't singing his song to a maiden in a window, but to a billy of water, and conceivably his own reflection. His attitude is one of a philosophical poet, musing on death, i.e. he's 'philosophizing': a descriptive term used by Peter Porter in his contemporary poem that includes a billy, (21-3). Is the Swagman a narcissist? According to Freud, the narcissist and the onanist are distinguished by the narcissist's possession of an ego: the Greek narcissist is more

developed, more sophisticated than the Judaeo-Christian onanist (Freud, 'Narcissism' 6-7); Giorgio Agamben points to Narcissus' pubescence (67). In 'Genesis', Onan tries to avoid impregnating his brother's wife and giving her children in his brother's name (God had killed his brother in an earlier episode). He masturbates and ejaculates on the floor. God kills Onan. He's sacrificed for his name, which he gives to 'onanism' (34). Both figures can be seen as foolish, but it is Onan who makes a conscious decision–though perhaps unaware of the consequences.

Comparison with the Jolly Swagman provides a reading of arrested development in the Swagman, who has avoided the manly responsibility of a job and a wife. Narcissus is deceived (by Echo, Nemesis and by himself); falls in love with his own reflection; is transformed into a Narcissus lily. There are a number of correspondences between the Jolly Swagman story and the story of Narcissus (Ovid 149-61). Narcissus is a Boeotian, and therefore aligned with the craftsman Swagman (Murray, 1997 126-7). The nymph Echo 'burns' when she comes near the 'fire' of Narcissus (151). Mapped onto 'Waltzing Matilda' the billy's fire is fuelled by the proximity of the Swagman. The refrain, 'Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?' is an echo, the billy-as-Echo joins in. 'May I die before I give you power o'er me!' says Narcissus to Echo. This is close to the Swagman's 'You'll never catch me alive!': he echoes Narcissus. Echo wastes away and becomes only a voice (153). This is echoed by the Swagman also, whose 'voice may be heard'. The ghost of the Swagman displaces the billy. The Swagman-ghost (dis)embodies both Narcissus and Echo. After Narcissus is subject to the 'righteous' curse of a scorned youth by the goddess Nemesis ('So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves!' (153)), he says 'I burn with love of my own self; I both kindle the flames and suffer them' (157). The billy then can be read as Narcissus, the Swagman *its* reflection. Narcissus' body, like that of the Swagman (and of Christ) is 'nowhere to be found. In place of his body they find a flower, its yellow centre girt with white petals' (161).

The Swagman drowns in the billabong, the body of water large enough to hold his body—and his body's reflection. A psychoanalytic reading is not the inevitable one, even for a depressive. An eco(-logical or -spiritual) or pastoral reading might suggest he is singing to the water itself. We sing the song knowing that the Swagman is dead from the beginning, is already a ghost. The rousing tune of 'Waltzing Matilda' attempts to deny this, as do political and historical readings. White Australians at least like to think of themselves as 'practical', without room for the superstition of the old countries.

The Irish poet, W.B. Yeats, who researched Irish folk myth extensively, writes of the importance of water to this mythology, and of the prevalence of death. A passage from 'The Celtic Twilight' (298) is particularly evocative: 'Even to-day our country people speak with the dead and with some who perhaps have never died as we understand death; and even our educated people pass without great difficulty into the condition of quiet that is the condition of vision. We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer, life because of our quiet'. While 'Waltzing Matilda' might be said to owe its popularity to its mythic quality, and may 'keep the Australian

spirit alive', it seems that the loud and repeated singings of 'Waltzing Matilda' are an effort to avoid 'quiet', and keep 'beings' like the Swagman away.

If billy is derived from 'billa,' an Aboriginal word for water, this naturalises the relationship and exchange between the two words. *COD* provides: 'billabong *n.* (Austral) river branch that forms backwater or stagnant pool. [f. Aboriginal *Billibang* Bell River (*billa* water)]' (88). *The Macquarie* gives a more dynamic version: '*n. Australian* 1. a waterhole in an anabranch, replenished only in flood time. 2. a waterhole in a river or creek that dries up outside the rainy season. [Aborig.; huri: lit., a watercourse which runs only after rain, from river + *-bang*] (101).

Neither dictionary provides a specific derivation for '-bong' or '-bang', though the qualification suggests a river that is stopped or blocked. Richardson writes: 'The Aboriginal word *billabong* is a compound. *Billa* means water in many dialects, and quite a few New South Wales place names end in billa or billy. *Bong* (also pronounced *bung*) is a widespread word for dead. Nowadays we mainly use it for machines and body parts, as in the complaint 'my knee's gone bung'' (Richardson 73-4). In other words, the word suggests 'dead water'.

A billabong is not permanently stagnant however, as a writer to the *Bulletin* explained on 7 March 1896:

> 'Billabong' does not signify a pond of dead motionless water. It is the aboriginal equivalent of 'ana-branch'—a natural by-wash or secondary channel, running, as a rule only in flood-time ... the integrity of the aboriginal term should be preserved.

This letter was from 'Tom Collins,' a.k.a. Joseph Furphy (Richardson 74). The move from 'bil[l]a' or 'billy' to 'billabong' is not unambiguously from life to death. The uncanny ironic billy can be dead and alive, as is also the case with the billabong and Swagman (Freud, 'Uncanny' 347). So, the billabong, like the billy and Swagman can be considered undead – undead water.

In an issue of *Meanjin* themed 'Crime and Punishment', Christopher Kelen describes the chorus of 'Waltzing Matilda' as an emptying of the landscape-song: as if it were a sinking boat, and the billy a bailing mechanism. The verses introduce invaders (Swagman, jumbuck, squatter, troopers) and the chorus waltzes them away. Kelen links this with 'the terra nullius of white man's lore': i.e. with Aboriginal dispossession. The theme of theft in Australia's national song is apt, expressing both the founding crime of stolen land and the later one of stolen generations. The ghosts of perpetrators and victims 'may be heard' but they have to be listened to/for. Kelen writes that '"black" words may be appropriated (*billabong, coolibah*) but...blacks are the principal absence'. He describes the Swagman as 'the ersatz victim' (as is the jumbuck) (Kelen 142-50). Yet another disastrous instance of Australian black-white contact can be seen in the song's finale: that of a death in custody. Of course the squatter and troopers can say they 'never touched him'. This narrative of a dancing ghost can be compared to the Native American 'Ghost

Dance' which imagines dancing on a reservation 'above ... white oppressors' (Newman 222).

'Waltzing Matilda' is one of an uncanny trinity of famous poems by Paterson, the other two being 'Clancy of the Overflow' (1889) and 'The Man from Snowy River' (1890) (Paterson 23, 220). 'Waltzing Matilda' features a Swagman-made-ghost made holy through the song's revered status, and lesser home-made (i.e. Australian) gods in the forms of squatter, troopers and Swagman. Anyone who knows the song and waits for a billy to boil at a campfire is likely to think of 'Waltzing Matilda'. Knowingness has a multiple aspect in 'Waltzing Matilda': the importance of knowing the song's words and tune, which it has in common with all sung ballads; also the knowing of the mystery of the story (the context of bush life, what 'waltzing matilda' and 'jumbuck' mean etc.) and of its location. The Swagman is knowing also, as suggested by the shift from 'Who'll come a-waltzing?' in the chorus to 'You'll come a waltzing' in the verses. This is emphasised in the more modern versions, where the Swagman's voice also says 'You'll' when the original asked 'Who'll?' (Paterson 67-9). Each singer of the ballad becomes the narrator telling the listener that the Swagman's ghost (or voice) may be heard as you pass by the billabongs: you know it, you've heard it, you know where the billabong is. 'Know' is also cognate with the second meaning of 'can' (and 'ken') (*COD*, 556). The first meaning of can is 'a metal vessel for liquids, usu. with handle' (132).

The knowingness of the billy and of 'Waltzing Matilda' point to the repository quality of both. In both of them multiple readings (and sentiments) of Australia can be found.

*

To look into a billy it must be lidless—if it had a lid it would boil faster. But that's a prosaic observation, and a billy is not a prosaic object. It *has* practical uses: as a(n animating) plot device, as a metonym, a symbol, an image that (apparently) encourages or disrupts verisimilitude, and as a sign of both authenticity and materiality. Billies tend to the multiple. I argue for a poetics of the billy, that it be noticed, that its iconicity, its resonance, and implications be regarded. It stands with horses, bushfire, swagmen and the bush itself, yet arguably resonates more than all of these. This is a grand claim to make against the bush, but the bush has no inevitable relationship with humans in the way that the billy and poetry do. And unlike the billy, the bush is not so easily defined as an image. The billy resists conservative agendas of patriotism, but does lend itself to being a 'guardian icon' of recycling, being one of the first recycled Australian objects. It also 'provides' a nomadic irony that is perhaps particularly Australian and is embodied in (and relies upon) the nomadic, celebrated and excoriated Swagman. The billy can be seen as his metonym, but that is to privilege the Swagman: to make him the crucial part of the equation, when it's the billy that has so much more possibility, and, to conceive of just one more metallic metaphor, is a key to Australia. To the extent that this is true it is a bonus, obtained by ironic method: by not looking for it, by looking at and into the billy (the poem) itself. Bonus—from the Latin *bonus*, *bonum*: a 'good (thing)' (*COD*, 102-3).

[1] Hereafter *COD*. Unless otherwise stated, all dictionary definitions refer to this text.
[2] A 'ratbag' is defined by the Macquarie Dictionary as '1. a rascal or rogue' and '2. someone of eccentric or nonconforming behaviour' (960). A 'battler' is given as '1. 'someone who struggles continually or persistently against heavy odds. 2. ... a conscientious worker, especially one living at subsistence level. 3 ... (formerly) an itinerant worker reduced to living as a swagman' (86). A 'digger' is 'an Australian or New Zealand soldier, especially one who served in World War I [such as an Anzac]' or '(a term of address among men) cobber; mate' (310).
[3] All capitalised references to the Jolly Swagman or Swagman are to the protagonist of 'Waltzing Matilda'. References to 'swagman' in lower case indicate swagmen in other texts or a generic swagman.
[4] The Stewart and Keesing version in full:

> Waltzing Matilda
>
> Oh! there once was a swagman camped in a billabong,
> Under the shade of a coolibah-tree;
> And he sang as he looked at his old billy boiling.
> "Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?"
>
> *Chorus* Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda my darling
> Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?
> Waltzing Matilda and leading a water-bag—
> Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?
>
> Down came a jumbuck to drink at the water-hole,
> Up jumped the swagman and grabbed him in glee;
> And he sang as he stowed him away in his tucker-bag,
> "You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me!"
>
> Down came the squatter a-riding his thoroughbred;
> Down came policemen—one, two and three.
> "Whose is the jumbuck you've got in the tuckerbag,
> You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me!"
>
> But the swagman he up and he jumped in the water-hole,
> Drowning himself by the coolibah-tree;
> And his ghost may be heard as it sings in the billabong,
> "Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?" (243-4)

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