
Melba's Puddin': Corowa, Mulwala and Our Cultural Past

Jeff Brownrigg

Let me begin by seeking your immediate approval. I grew up and was educated just a stone's throw down the Murray, at Mulwala, one of the river towns in the Shire of Corowa. Most of my fellows at primary school there did what was customary in the town and travelled to Corowa for a couple of days each week in what were, I think, called grades seven and eight. As it happened I did the traitorous thing and crossed the Murray to study at Yarrawonga High School.

It was over the Mulwala School gate that I first saw a real swagman. He was called 'Johnny Boy' and owned a blue heeler—whose name I cannot recall—which he picked up by the tail for the amusement of nine-year olds. 'Look! I can pick him up by the "shit stick"!' he would say and several kids hanging on the steel mesh of the gate would snigger and catch each other's eye with a look that registered some acknowledgement that this smelly, dishevelled adult was at the least naughty, but probably sinful.

In those days the word 'bloody' teetered on the edge of obscenity. The various ministers in the town (Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Church of England and the Catholic priest, serving a population of a few hundred—you had to go to Yarrawonga for the Methodists) described the dire consequences in store for those who used profane or indecent language. Although we knew that even our parents swore from time to time—at least we suspected as much—we recognized an important difference between them and this old bushman. There was no guarantee that he had broken horses or shorn sheep, but it seemed possible that he had been, once, what historians regularly called a pastoral worker. If he had been one of these at some time in the past, now he was reduced to cadging what he could. Had his time passed? Had he always been the same, only younger? Had the world rolled by and changed so much that he no longer had a logical place in it?

The kids of Mulwala had no doubt. 'Johnny Boy' did not fit into the ordered grid of Mulwala's streets. He came and went in no apparent pattern and for a time camped in a scruffy tin hut on a rough, sandy bit of paddock between what is now the multimillion dollar Services Club and the weekender/holiday houses springing up in places where, in my childhood, there were goannas, cicadas and dry, yellow grass. Today there is no trace of the corrugated iron walls which had kept out some of the frost, and the patch where his floor used to be has been tidied up by a heavy-duty mower on the back of a Shire of Corowa tractor.

Perhaps 'Johnny Boy' came to stand for more than he should. Like everybody else at school I was encouraged to form a picture of what a characteristic nineteenth-century Australian might have been. There was no doubt from those early accounts that the archetype was a man; a bearded, bowyanged wanderer who was straight-speaking, if he spoke at all, and who lived a sort of uncomplicated, pioneering existence somewhere in the bush. He shunned civilized values and came to be suspicious of the city with its characteristic money-men. Archetypal capitalists, the 'Fat Man' of the *Bulletin*, were portrayed in the same spirit in other journals, decked out in the dress suit which indicated financial success, power and social privilege. In comparison, the bushman wore the symbols of another social class, a costume that was sometimes tinged with bohemian radicalism. The literary bushman was a quite distant relative of 'Johnny Boy'.

But it was the literary bushman that was conjured up in Mulwala School in 1955, and Mulwala was probably quite characteristic of smaller inland settlements. The town was so much in the bush as to appear, at certain times, unpopulated. A shotgun fired on any midday in summer along Melbourne Road, from the Royal Mail Hotel towards the canal bridge and Corowa Road, would have caused no injury. It might have roused, perhaps, one sleepy red dog on the dusty verandah of Bowles' general store where the hurricane lanterns and rabbit traps, suspended from the ceiling, would have jingled in sympathy. Mulwala was sleepy and swagmen were rare enough to be a novelty, even in a town that seemed to embody those things that were not 'of the city'.

Everywhere there was evidence that some people lived in towns and others on farms. There was no middle ground. A symbiosis had evolved over time. The town serviced a sprawling rural community which in turn helped to make the town viable. The fairly simple pattern of mutual support continued until the poker machine and weekenders (who came every weekend and not just at Christmas) changed the town's character with a new energy and a new dynamic. But in the 1950s it squatted quietly on the Murray, unprovoked and unchallenged, measuring out its time against two yardsticks: the sirens that carved up the day for workers at the Government munitions factory and the broader, more flexible rhythms of the rural calendar. Mulwala saw very few swagmen in residence or just passing through, although there were other people about the town who had a background in itinerant rural work.

Pastoral workers—or bush workers as they were known locally—who had settled and who must have been like earlier manifestations of their type, were sometimes identifiable. They might have been links in a chain which stretched back in time from the rock 'n rolling, quarter-acre-blocked, Holden owners to the first convict shepherds. One of the bush workers, Ray Barr, who could lift a decent strainer-post or a heifer from a good paddock by himself, and who had about him many of the features of the larrikin, seemed to embody some characteristics of the legendary bushman. He had a dry sense of humour and, at times, an

unquenchable thirst. Both of these could be the source of problems for himself and for others. Once, late on a Friday afternoon, he was halfway through giving a friend at the munitions factory a haircut when the 'home-time' whistle blew. 'Okay!' he said, 'we'll finish that next week.' Somebody went lop-sided until Monday. This was characteristic mischief; a swaggering, self-confident larrikinism with a touch of wry disrespect for an individual's comfort and also for the organization of a working day.

While Mulwala school children were looking for local evidence of the characteristic Australian, wore linked Union Jacks and the Australian flag on Empire Day or were moved by the Recessional on Anzac Day, Russell Ward was building his extended examination of a 'national mystique'. Chapter eight of *The Australian Legend* (1958), entitled 'Apotheosis of the Nomad Tribe', identifies many of the influences that had given rise to the bushman myth and notes that the acceleration in the rate of change experienced as the nineteenth century drew to a close, helped to consolidate it.¹ By the time of federation, 'the "noble bushman" was already enshrined in both the popular and the literary imagination.' The 'discovery of the bush by literary men' was crucial to the consolidation of the myth.² I would argue, rather, for the idea of the relatively sudden emergence of 'the Bush', with its accretions of significance, some of them fabrications. It commanded a dominant position in the quest for a national identity to which it was not entitled.

The bushman 'type' had passed into legend earlier than the First World War even though it was in evidence in France and the Middle East. Perhaps it had already become the fixed expression of Australian character and, as such, a model for behaviour. Perhaps the 'bushman's bible', as the *Bulletin* was sometimes known, had helped to create an expectation, a standard form of Australianness built around a core of the *Bulletin's* values. It came as something of a surprise that almost twenty years after Mulwala Central School children discussed the idea of the 'bushman', reading bits of Furphy, Paterson and Lawson to fill out the picture, another of my teachers, the literary critic F. R. Leavis, reminiscing about his experiences during the Great War, commented on several occasions during seminars, that Australians were 'all big men who knew how to handle the army'. Whilst this cannot have been always true, it is interesting and curious that this perspicacious Cambridge don carried an impression which is so close to the generalization Australians have explored. The truth is, of course, much more complex than any of these single instances on which the generalizations have been built. Australians have long recognized that the myth has some basis in the evolution of white Australia but that it is by no means the whole picture.

Even in Grade Five at Mulwala Central School something like an alternative view was presented. In those days everybody recited selected verse as a part of the daily routine. As well as 'All the world's a stage' (which was, I think, in a Victorian *Reader* and also used in New South Wales), 'The Seven Ages of Man', 'The Modest Violet' and 'The Daffodils', we learned, by heart, George Essex Evans' 'The Women of the West'. It didn't add much to my sense of what the bushman was. In fact, because these women 'left the vine-wreathed cottage and the mansion on the hill' to face 'the wilderness' for the love of the pioneering men they followed, they were really like us; like the townies. We could imagine our own mothers

¹ See Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1966, pp. 180–206.

² *ibid.*

sacrificing comforts to follow their men. We might even have been able to invent visions of an imaginary wilderness which looked nothing like Mulwala would have appeared in the 1850s. Evans was surely thinking of bark huts, clearing scrub, hostile natives and distance from suburban services—of the genesis of our own town. School and daily life helped to build the mythical figure we have come to hold up as characteristically Australian. Later, this was reinforced for me in some literature and films and in the tendency to take the images promulgated by the *Bulletin* as typical, especially typical of the final decades of the last century and the first of the present one.

What I discovered as I grew up was that the whole historical and cultural record is a much richer and very much more complicated tapestry than we had been led to believe in the middle 1950s. If we look for those who, in some way, came to signify Australianness in their own time, then we would need to search where most people in Australia have lived since the 1788 invasion: the coastal cities and larger inland towns. This is where the common new Australian is still to be found in increasing numbers. The things that people did in Australian towns and cities were much as they were anywhere else; the same hierarchies, the same amenities and the same urban aspirations. The pattern of urban life, which had been established for more than a hundred years by the 1950s, was based on nostalgic recollections of another world. It was built on adaptations of Westminster-style government, adaptations of cottage gardens and adaptations of an Anglo-Celtic lifestyle often to harsher realities than those experienced in Europe. It has been argued that by 1900 Australia had more pianos per capita than any other country—perhaps as much as one piano for every fourth or fifth person in Australia at federation.³ If this is true, then it lends considerable support to the contention that the piano is a better symbol of the Australian lifestyle at that time than the pint-pot billy, dangling somewhat precariously from a rolled and shouldered Wagga rug.

If we examine the broader picture by asking who were the most conspicuous Australians in the years immediately preceding federation, and especially in the 1890s, we will almost certainly need to settle for a model that the history books have failed to record adequately. Until recently we had been so attracted to the 'Australian Legend' myth that we frequently failed to notice any substantial figure not included in this mythology. Having excluded people from the textbooks, sometimes on the grounds of their race and more usually because of their gender, the lives and achievements of many worthwhile Australians have simply been lost. Subsequent acknowledgment cannot be made where no systematic record has been kept, regardless of the fact that the evidence is there in newspapers, manuscript collections and often recorded on cylinders and shellac discs. In addition, there is the lost legacy of those who left no record.

We have tended to focus, not unexpectedly perhaps, on the Anglo-Celtic mainstream, discovering in it a single line of tradition. While Britans might have thought of Australians as

³ Discussions concerning the numbers of pianos in Australia in the nineteenth century are rarely supported with hard evidence, but I have heard figures like these reported in a number of conference papers. Roger Covell in *Australia's Music: Themes for a New Society*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1964, cites the evidence of Oscar Comettant, a French official at the Centennial Exhibition held in Melbourne in 1888, suggesting that by about 1888 over 700,000 pianos had been imported into Australia. Humphrey McQueen uses Covell's citation of Comettant in his chapter about a broader Australian musical sensibility in *A New Britannia: an Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 1978 (revised edn).

being cast in a British mould, there is evidence that they also noted that Australians were the product of a hot, distant, primitive colony. They had seen the anxious stirrings of Australia's 'bunyip aristocracy' as the first of the Australian-born generations of British travelled home, ready to accept or to clone, in the colonies, the institutions of government and society accepted by their fathers. They watched the effect of gold and the rapid change in the mix of nationalities which resulted—among them Chinese, Greek, Italian and American (even black American). The degree to which the cultural mainstream was affected by this migration is difficult to assess because neglect has rendered it largely invisible. The ascendant culture discovered that it was faced with a number of choices. Marginalizing sub-cultures was one alternative and could be applied, for example, to the 'heathen Chinamen'. Assimilation was another, and those of differing ethnicity but in the same social class might be absorbed, and thus lose their 'difference'. One of my own great-great-grandfathers, Georgios Morfesis, stayed on after the gold and married into the Irish. A goldfield Greek who came from Ithaca in 1851, he is occasionally mentioned in the newspapers of his time.⁴ In one 1856 report from Castlemaine, he appeared before the Police Court after calling another miner (a coloured man, possibly a West Indian, with a colourful name, Napoleon de la Ray) a 'Bloody black nigger and other names of similar character'. This is no small tribute to the quickness with which he acquired English language skills, if rather lacking in sophistication in other respects. Morfesis' small contribution to civilization as we know it, was that he made enough as a digger to get himself started in a shop, becoming a contender for the title of Victoria's first Greek-born shop keeper. Hugh Gilchrist, in his magnificent work *Australians and Greeks* (1992),⁵ devotes a whole chapter to Australian-Greek shop-keeping and its place in the evolution of Australian (and British) fast-food outlets, especially fish and chip shops, which expressed the transposition of the maritime culture of the Greeks. Much more could be claimed for the cultural contributions that accompanied the twentieth-century Greek migration and, of course, for the contributions of dozens of other cultures especially those from Europe and from Asia.

By the 1870s Australia was exporting the fruits of its goldrushes and these were not only material. What we discover, when we pursue this idea, is that the world at large saw a picture that was very different from the myth of the bushman we have, as a nation, created for ourselves. The society that craved and cosseted the parlour piano, and patronized fish and chip shops, has its roots in an urban culture which evolved and matured steadily during the nineteenth century and especially after the first goldrushes. On the land (and in the wilderness) the tendency to throw up protective barriers of deciduous trees, orchards and green lawns around country houses, to construct cushioning defences to block out the reality of the land (often flat, dry and inhospitable) is a part of this reflex. Within the compounds, inside the walls of trees, in darkened rooms behind wide verandahs, the parlour piano lurked, linking the domestic worlds of the city and the bush. The extent to which performance on the instrument was a female activity is not known. I would guess that more women developed the skill to perform, although it is difficult to substantiate outside the results of musical competitions, reports in the social pages of periodicals and the preponderance of female students under the wing of the Mercy Nuns.

⁴ Tas Psarakis of the Australian Hellenic Historical Society has provided much of what I know about Georgios Morfesis. Hugh Gilchrist's important work (cited below) contains several references to Morfesis.

⁵ Hugh Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, Halstead, Sydney, 1992. Chapter 10, pp. 190–256, describes the shop-keeping phenomenon.

One of the most interesting and ultimately influential occurrences which began in the 1870s and 1880s was the ascendancy of the internationally celebrated Australian singer. Almost all were women and many of them were the products of the teaching of the ubiquitous Sisters of Mercy. We have always known that they were there, but we have been unable to assess and sometimes unwilling to acknowledge their significance. In order to establish the 'type', we need to begin with one who was not taught by the Mercies. This, of course, is Nellie Melba. Though she was not the first to win accolades abroad, Melba became the first really conspicuous Australian with a legitimately international profile and reputation. She went to Europe in 1886, determined to make something of her singing. She did not return to Australia until 1902. From the late 1880s onwards she was the brightest Australian star in the musical firmament and, more than this, she eclipsed the reputations of all other Australians from any profession who had made a place for themselves in the Old World before she got there.

Melba is rarely given much credit for her intelligence. Her wit, at times bawdy, has been rarely acknowledged. Everybody has a Melba story. Or rather, from the time she first returned to Australia in 1902 until forty years after her death, everybody had a Melba story. These were usually constructed according to rules which were set down at the turn of the century. A Melba story should portray the diva as a scheming prima donna, jealous of rivals (especially Australian sopranos) and disdainful of her audiences. It should show that she was a champagne guzzler or even a drug addict who had deserted her husband, abandoned her only child and become a whore amongst the crowned heads of Europe. It is hardly surprising that books, radio dramas, films and television mini-series have taken up her story. But, like the bushman, the Melba of the popularly imagined anecdote was a fabrication. The characteristic Melba yarn concocted during the middle years of the twentieth century when many people could still remember having heard her sing live and who understood the impact she had made in the world, are often without foundation. At its worst it was a tale designed to level the tall poppy. At its best it was a nod and wink about a larrikin. Melba understood what Australianness had come to mean. She might seek approval from the well-heeled supporters of Covent Garden, but the terms in which she chose to do it were often based on her own perception of being Australian. The Melba persona was as much the product of careful craft as it was an off-shoot of innate character. What we accept, today, is the result of an interaction of actual incident, Melba's posturing and the numerous Melba yarns.

It is still possible to trace the sources of much of the rumour and innuendo which gave rise to Melba's reputation at home. *The Freeman's Journal*, a Melbourne Catholic weekly, noted early in June 1899 when citing the first public appearances of Amy Castles, a 'young convent girl' and almost certainly 'the New Melba', that the old Melba's proposed first tour of Australia was the direct result of her noticing her 'rival'.⁶ This was an absurd claim. Amy had

⁶ *The Freeman's Journal* was in open conflict with the *Bulletin* regarding Amy Castles' value as a singer. The *Bulletin* first suggested that the 'Castles boom' was a Catholic plot.

Dame Nellie Melba, 1899

a wonderful natural voice but she was not a great singer. However, in 1899 it seemed that she could become the force required to dislodge Melba, the Protestant tart. The need for Catholic cultural weapons became obvious after 1884, and the arrival of Archbishop Moran, which initiated a sort of Irish Catholic imperialism. The great Irish mission in Australia had begun.⁷ If the Church could find an alternative to the most obvious and successful Australian, and if this person was solid in her faith, then supplanting the greatest living Australian icon would be an extraordinary victory for Moran's Australian mission. Australian Catholics were encouraged to take the view that Melba's separation, divorce and her public appearances with the pretender to the French throne were serious moral errors. The snarling of the Catholic press helped to consolidate the view that she was vindictive and dangerous. There was a clear campaign to discredit her. On 15 July 1899, Sydney's *Catholic Press* announced, in the midst of Melba's international triumph, that 'all the Australian singers of note are Catholics'. It is unlikely that Melba would have read this, but the calculated effect, the dismissive sneer, is characteristic.

Another newspaper, John Norton's *Truth*, carried an open letter to Melba on 28 March 1903, accusing her of being a drunkard who let her audiences down by not being in a fit state to appear.⁸ Norton, himself a notorious drunk, simply got his facts wrong and pumped up false generalisations based on a single incident when Melba was indisposed due to a raw throat after sea-sickness during a particularly rough crossing from Melbourne to Launceston. She was certainly not drunk. Guarding her main asset from the ravages of time, the atmosphere, germs, plonk and other hazards, was a lifelong preoccupation. It is impossible to see Melba in terms other than those suggested by the attention she devoted to her voice and her career.

Matters were not helped when, in 1932, the year after Melba died, one of her secretaries, Beverley Nichols, published a novel entitled *Evensong*.⁹ Nichols drew a picture of an ageing prima donna, jealous of the rising generation. Readers immediately accepted the novel as an authoritative account of Melba's twilight years. This consolidated what the Catholic presses started and John Norton had embroidered. If all of these sources were taken together—some of them sectarian, others from the pens of journalists out to expose the crimes of the rich and famous and yet others in the words apparently from those who had been close to her—then what should Australians think of Melba? In effect, for a set of quite complex reasons, Australians set about dismantling the pedestal on which their first great internationally acknowledged compatriot had been placed. And this activity, first set in train as the century turned, has set the tone of almost everything that has since been written about Melba.

Under different circumstances Melba might have fared better. In a climate where the possibility of an endorsement of a degree of independent nationhood was being debated in important events like the Corowa Conference, the opportunity to value Melba and others like her might have presented itself. It could have occurred only if Australians had not been so

⁷ See Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish In Australia*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1986, especially p. 236 ff.

⁸ Norton's 'open letter' to Melba is reproduced in Michael Cannon, *That Damned Democrat: John Norton, an Australian Populist, 1858–1916*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1979.

⁹ Beverley Nichols' novel *Evensong* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1932) has been treated as a thinly disguised biography. It is a work of fiction.

attracted to the construction of the male-centred myth and so repelled by the fabrications they were invited to believe. Corowa came a little early to generate enthusiasm for Melba as a national symbol. The will of the people had not yet been consolidated into a collective reverence for Australianness, even Australianness that presented itself as operatic, awesome and, for many Australians, alien. Melba had enough nous to include popular ballads, especially the Scots and Irish standard parlour repertoire, in her concerts and on her recordings.

If we can agree that Melba was indeed very important, and if you are prepared to share my opinion that she was the first conspicuous Australian, what made her distinctively so? The answer can be found in Australian history and it is to do with the place of women and the shapes their lives might reasonably be expected to take. For most women in the late nineteenth century the answer was simple. For a time it seemed that Melba would be typical. She had given notice of her intention to sing before she met Charles Armstrong, the dashing, handsome, well-connected man she married. But almost straight away, and like many women of her time, she became pregnant. In addition, she found herself living on a failing sugar plantation in tropical Queensland. It must have become clear to her quite quickly that she did not wish to follow the pattern dictated for her biologically and, also, that Charles Armstrong was unlikely to be a reasonably secure provider. The decision to return to Melbourne and to pursue a career in singing is usually reported to have been mutually agreed, and it is what Melba did. Her success was neither sudden nor particularly miraculous, unless one counts the death of the European entrepreneur to whom she had been contracted to sing, causing the cancellation of a contract which she would have been obliged to complete. As it turned out, she was able to take up a superior offer in Brussels which brought her into the public eye and made it possible for her to become, quickly, the greatest singer of her time.¹⁰

Few of the concocted Melba stories are as valuable as those which demonstrate her assault on the bastions of male ignorance and indifference. She had been born into a wilderness of male prejudice. She recognised it as a threat from which she needed to liberate herself. The pastoral worker might have provided a model for an urban reverie about a bushman-Adam, but most men who thought about creating an Australian image were to be found in towns and cities. Men controlled finance and law, thought and custom. There were few women in powerful positions. Very few were seriously influential in public life. Most of them knew their place and were not encouraged to have aspirations above their gender.

In her biography *Melba, The Voice of Australia* (1986), Therese Radic cites a letter from Percy Grainger to his lover Karen Holten. This letter might have been a piece of disinterested reporting or Grainger might have been ‘dishing up’ an example of Australian folklore for her, as he ‘dished up’ pieces for the piano for paying audiences, often arranging well-known pieces scored for a piano and orchestra, into elaborate piano solos:

I am going to listen at Melba’s first reappearance this evening. My father was on the same ship with her. Think what she said, quite publicly, moreover at the table when someone offered her jelly which

¹⁰ Therese Radic’s *Melba*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1986, is the most valuable of several accounts of the diva’s life. John Hetherington, who wrote *Melba: A Biography* (Faber, London, 1967) allows his own prejudices to get out of hand.

was a little unfirm. 'No thanks, there are two things I like stiff and jelly's one of them.'¹¹

Now this might, at first sight and if the story is true, appear to be what others have cited as Melba's natural coarseness or the crude colonial portion of her character. But there is more to it than that. Melba chose to make a point about language and the subjects available to, and thought seemly for, women. She assaulted a register of sexual reference reserved for men in their own company. It was not, in my view, simply a matter of what Melba could get away with. She enjoyed confrontations with the prejudices she clearly recognized and abhorred.

There were other instances. Melba used her influence on behalf of imprisoned suffragettes and in 1909 tried to register racing colours with the AJC in the green, white and violet of the Women's Social and Political Union. Perhaps the most celebrated Melba story is the one related by Clara Butt, the English contralto, who asked Melba's opinion about repertoire suitable for an Australian tour. In Dame Clara's biography the English singer reports that Melba told her to 'Sing 'em muck. It's all they understand.' The pages which contained this report were removed from a special 'doctored' Australian edition. The offending lines were replaced in specially re-written, tipped-in replacement pages.¹² It is likely that Melba actually gave Dame Clara this advice and a perusal of touring concert programmes from the period supports Melba's view, although she respected her Australian audiences enough to instigate some damage control at home. There is another less well-known report about the same incident in the memoirs of the pianist and sometime Melba accompanist, Ivor Newton.¹³ Not long before her death Newton asked Melba if she had, indeed, advised Dame Clara to 'sing 'em muck'. With no hesitation she replied: 'How could that be? Dame Clara didn't need to be told.' Melba's opinion, in this instance, also seems to be supported by the evidence. Melba had a lively wit. She was highly intelligent, well able to analyse the world about her, to form opinions and to respond to it. She managed her career, her voice and her money—as Therese Radic points out—with considerable skill, and they returned dividends all of her life.

Certainly Melba's career suggested a model for others who followed. The 'new Melba' never really eventuated although several singers like Amy Castles were set up to replace her. Stella Power, the 'little Melba', who was encouraged by her namesake, never scaled the heights. Regardless of her singing gift, Gertrude Johnson, who owed something to Melba and could be seen as another candidate, was distracted by other theatrical interests.¹⁴ True to form, Australians have always blamed Melba for failing to produce a suitable vocal heir. There were other singers, like Florence Austral, Margherita Grandi, Marjorie Lawrence and Joan Hammond in the 1930s and '40s, but it was not until the 1950s, twenty years after Melba's death, that the next undisputed international Australian-born diva appeared. Joan Sutherland

¹¹ Therese Radic, *Melba*, op. cit., p. 128.

¹² Clara Butt's biography, written by Winifred Ponder, was published as *Clara Butt: Her Life Story*, Harrap, London, 1928.

¹³ See Ivor Newton, *At The Piano*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1966. The book is composed of autobiographical anecdotes.

¹⁴ See Barbara McKenzie and Findlay McKenzie's *Singers of Australia: From Melba to Sutherland*, Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1967, and the Currency Press chronology *Entertaining Australia*, Currency, Sydney, 1992.

worked her way steadily towards the pinnacle of her career and projected an Australianness that was quite different from the variety that Melba chose to convey. Melba had little choice. Her lively reaction to her time, which included an assessment of what things in her own personality might be amplified to emphasize Australianness and her seizing upon what she saw as her right to independence and a career, established how she could and would relate to the world. *La Stupenda* did not have to establish and assert her right to the independence a career in singing might bring. Neither did she need to defend the proposition that the wealth and power that successful singing could bring were legitimate goals for women. She violated no expectation that women should be lesser mortals. In a very real sense, Melba had challenged that view and helped to change the way Australians thought about themselves.

Melba was not the only international Australian celebrity in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. There were other women. When Melba first went to Europe, journalists in Australia said that she was good, but that it seemed unlikely that she would ever become as famous as Amy Sherwin. Sherwin, the ‘Tasmanian Nightingale’, was discovered near Hobart by a touring Italian opera company. They heard her singing as they looked for somewhere to have a picnic. She had a distinguished career in opera and concert singing in Australia, Europe and America.¹⁵ There are no known sound recordings of her singing. Judging from contemporary written reports, her voice was bigger than Melba’s but did not have the silvery brilliance. There were popular singers, too, who became celebrated in their field. Florrie Forde, from Richmond in Victoria, had developed a notable career in musicals and vaudeville before she left Australia in the late 1890s. She became a mainstay of the English music hall for almost forty years, universally valued for her generous spirit and her vivacious singing of chorus songs. She sang, recorded and made popular dozens of songs that have come to represent the music of the period between 1900 and 1940. ‘Its A Long Way To Tipperary’, ‘Pack Up Your Troubles’, ‘Hello, Hello, Who’s Your Lady Friend’, ‘Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly’, ‘Oh! Oh! Antonio’ and the music hall anthem ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’ were all Florrie Forde songs and there were dozens more. Before 1950 most Australians were word-perfect in these songs (especially the choruses), largely as a result of sound recordings and radio, but in spite of Florrie’s broad nasal vowels, few recognized that she was one of them.

Melba and Florrie are easy to classify, both of them singing in recognizable genres. Melba is supposed to have enjoyed Florrie’s singing, going as far as saying that if the vaudevillian had taken a different path she might have found a place on the opera stage. But it is even possible to find an early international Australian who actually achieved an unusual blend of vaudeville and opera, as well as making an unexpected contribution to British trade unionism. During the 1890s, Ada Colley, a soprano from Parramatta, developed a singing career in Australia and subsequently travelled to Europe. Here she sang with considerable success in opera houses and theatres from Dublin to St Petersburg. After gradually becoming disenchanted with the elitist nature of opera presentations, she decided to take ‘high’ singing to the vaudeville stage. In January 1907, she was one of the leaders, together with Marie Lloyd and Albert Chevalier, of the strike which established the British actors trade union, the Variety Artists’ Federation (VAF).¹⁶ Although the leaders of the strike were told that there would be

¹⁵ See Judith A. Bowler, *Amy Sherwin*, Specialty Press, Hobart, 1982.

¹⁶ See Jeff Brownrigg, ‘The imperishable radiance of Ada Colley’, *Australasian Sound Archive*, no. 13, March 1991, pp. 19–26.

no retribution from the owners of the music hall chains, Ada Colley soon disappeared from the reviews, but not before she had tried to set up a vaudeville theatre outside the established circuits.

At about the same time as Colley was learning to sing in Australia, Frances Saville, the daughter of Martin and Fanny Simonsen, who established an opera company in Melbourne in the mid-nineteenth century, built a significant career in Europe and America, but, most importantly, in Vienna.¹⁷ In 1900, towards the end of her stage career and having developed a wide-ranging operatic repertoire which included Wagner, Puccini and Mozart, Saville presented to the enthusiastic Viennese an interpretation of Fiordiligi in Gustav Mahler's bench-mark production of Mozart's opera 'Cosi Fan Tutti'. She was also the first Australian to make commercial sound recordings, recording several tracks which were advertised for sale in 1896. Saville, like many of her talented musical contemporaries, has been almost totally lost to Australians. The hot and cold relationship which Australians have had with 'the arts' and with those Australian exponents who have excelled internationally, might be one reason. Another was Saville's expatriate status for most of her mature career. Yet another was the general expectation, commonly expressed in the nineteenth century, that the arts, and especially the theatrical arts, were seedy and suspect.

An array of successful
Australian song-birds, with a
clearly dominant Melba, is
challenged for perching space by
Amy Castles.

Australasian, July 1899

¹⁷ See Jeff Brownrigg, 'Questions about Frances Saville', *Australasian Sound Archive*, no. 15, April 1992.

Another of these singing women, Ella Caspers, was, like Amy Castles, taught music by the Mercy Sisters. These teaching nuns arrived in Australia from Kilkenny in the 1860s. Some of them were sent, rather curiously, by a Dr Brownrigg—another distant relative—and they arrived with a clear sense of what they wished to do. However, the Mercies quickly discovered what they would be able to do. After altercations with several Catholic bishops in Western and South Australia, and a disastrous encounter with Bishop James Quinn in Brisbane, which almost saw them conclude their work in Queensland and return to Ireland, they settled into their mission. One way of funding it was to teach music. Mercy Convents, which sprang up in almost all large Australian towns, saw troops of piano, violin and vocal studies students filing through their music-room doors. Musical journals like the *Australian Musical News* report the examination successes of the pupils of the Yarrowonga Convent and many others. And the Sisters taught all comers, even Protestants, if they could pay the fees. The claim could be supported that these teaching nuns were the first large group of organized, professional Australian working women. Their music teaching became legendary and one result was the liberation of a number of talented female singers from the fate of most Catholic women of their time. It was not necessarily by their example that the Mercies liberated some Australians, but, rather, that they gave many women the option of building a career by providing them with what was slowly becoming a respectable means of earning large sums of money. Financial rewards available to singers could also mean personal independence.

In addition to these potential personal and material gains, there were important aesthetic and intellectual aspects to music and musical life. If the taciturn bushman can be characterised as grunting his way through life following thought patterns which matched the sparse landscape that he inhabited (regardless of the supposed archness of his wit), then these singing women present a serious challenge to the bushman mythology and establish a quite different national type. The tendency to support the universality of the bushman myth is probably evidence of insecurity amongst those who have been prepared to accept it as truth. Had the myth been constructed differently, or had it been more complex, multi-faceted and less gender-specific, it might have been more credible. It also ignores Australia's indigenous, pre-conquest heritage.

The national archetypes constructed in the 1890s are seriously flawed. When the children of the Corowa Shire in the middle of the next century discuss the past, they will be able to refer to databases where an accurate, comprehensive picture of the emergence of a truly tolerant and egalitarian society is available to them. But this will only be possible if we work today to fill in the gaps. Some of these have been created by time while others have resulted from our enthusiasm to build a national mythology based on limited information where women and non Anglo-Celtic males were thought not to matter. The foolishness of the denial of Australian aesthetic, emotional and intellectual experience which the 'bushman' ethos encourages, has lately been recognised. We now need to move on, to make the picture of the past as complete and as detailed as we can. Corowa's past, like that of many other Australian towns, is full of interest and richness. I can find no reference to a visit from Melba, though Peter Dawson performed in Corowa several times, doubtless striding up the hill from his hotel in Sanger Street to sing under the painted arch in Oddfellows Hall. That image of the stocky bass baritone, appropriately dressed for the occasion and with a Corowa audience eating out of his hand, is probably a fair reflection of Australia in 1912. It is a part of a tradition of touring artists about which we know very little.

We will inevitably construct a new paradigm. 'Johnny Boy' the swagman and his ilk will have an honourable but reduced place in it. The larrikin attitude towards authority embodied in the 'Digger' and evident in Melba's chosen public persona will need to be there. Amy Sherwin, Melba and Dawson, and the vibrant culture which they, and many others, generated—thousands of performances and millions of sound recordings—will be recognised as signalling those other substantial parts of Australia's heritage; of a broader, urban reality. We will then have a heritage which, once fully recovered, we can hardly fail to value.