

CHRISTINA'S MATILDA – A WALTZ OF DISCOVERY

Edel Wignell ©

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Who was Christina Macpherson? Most people say, 'I've never heard of her.' Who was Banjo Paterson? Most people say, 'A famous Australian poet.' They know that Andrew Barton ('Banjo') Paterson wrote the words of 'Waltzing Matilda', Australia's most popular song. He created the lyrics at the home of Christina Macpherson's brother, Bob, and she provided the tune, so should be as famous as he.

My first compiling project for children was *A Boggle of Bunyips* (1981), a collection of myths, legends, poetry, articles and short stories about the monster of Indigenous myth, and how the European settlers responded to its supposed existence.

While researching bunyips, I noticed that there was a wealth of information about swagmen. Growing up on a farm in northern Victoria in the forties I was familiar with swaggies, so, as I gathered bunyips, I photocopied swaggie information, for I knew that my next compilation would be *A Bluey of Swaggies* (1985). The term 'swaggie' covers both swagmen who were seeking work and sundowners who weren't. The most fascinating part of the swaggie research was that relating to shearing.

The early 1890s was a time of great economic depression and unemployment. Squatters lowered the wages of shearers and, in 1891 and 1894, many shearers went on strike. The squatters brought in 'scab labour' and the Queensland Government sent both police troopers and the military to keep order. The strikers burnt down several shearing sheds in New South Wales and Queensland, including the Dagworth woolshed, which had been built for forty shearers to shear at least 120,000 sheep, and to class and press the wool.

Ewan Macpherson owned Dagworth Station on the Diamantina River, about eighty miles (128 kilometres) from Winton in north-western Queensland, and his son Bob was the manager, assisted by brothers, Gideon and Jack. The property was huge – a quarter of a million acres (101,171 hectares) - grazing at least 120 thousand head of sheep and 450 horses.

The Macphersons had asked for government help to cope with the militant shearers, and armed men had been sent. But, on Saturday night, 1 September 1894, a party of sixteen shearers crept up and, under gunfire, set the shed alight, burning 140 lambs which had been penned, ready to be shorn by 'scab' labour, and partly destroying the shed, as well.

Ewan Macpherson had a large home in Melbourne and owned properties in three states. The family had arrived in Victoria from Scotland in 1854. They took up land Victoria and New South Wales and, later, in

Queensland. At the time of the shearers' strikes, Ewan Macpherson and his wife had been in Australia for forty years, their family of ten being adults.

After the death of Mrs Macpherson 4 December 1894, Ewan Macpherson took two daughters, Christina (aged 30) and Jane (36), to Dagworth for a reunion with their brothers. On arriving at Winton, the Macphersons met Sarah Riley, who had been one of Christina's friends – a boarder at 'Oberwyl', an exclusive school for young ladies in St Kilda, Melbourne. With Sarah, visiting her relatives, was her fiancé, the solicitor and poet, 'Banjo' Paterson. The Macphersons invited Sarah Riley and 'Banjo' Paterson to visit the family at Dagworth.

At that time, the Great Shearers' Strike of 1894 was being discussed throughout Australia. Riding on the property with Bob Macpherson, 'Banjo' saw the partly-burnt woolshed and a dead sheep with a shoulder and a leg missing, and the overseer introduced him to the term 'waltzing Matilda'. No doubt he heard of rebel shearers and a swagman who had drowned after jumping into a waterhole.

In the evenings at Dagworth, the Macphersons and their guests, entertained themselves with lively conversation; Christina Macpherson played the zither, 'Banjo' recited poetry and everyone sang. Christina often played the march, 'Craigielea', which she had heard the previous year. Listening to the catchy tune, 'Banjo' created the 'Waltzing Matilda' ballad and put the words and the melody together. Soon everyone was singing it.

Stepping back to the previous year: Christina lived at home in Toorak, caring for her invalided mother. Her younger sister Margaret had married Stewart McArthur (later, Justice Sir Stewart McArthur) of Meningoort, near Camperdown in western Victoria.

In April 1894, Christina visited Margaret and Stewart Macarthur at Meningoort, and they attended a three-day race meeting at Warrnambool, with daily picnics and races, and balls at night. A band played constantly, and one of the tunes Christina heard several times was a march, 'Craigielee', based on an old Scottish ballad, 'Thou Bonnie Wood O' Craigielee'. Christina liked the tune and, having a keen ear for music, on returning home, often played it on the piano.

Soon after the creation of 'Waltzing Matilda' in 1895, it was being sung throughout the Winton and Hughenden districts and, from there, its popularity spread rapidly throughout Australia. Space does not permit to outline its history here, but it can be found in many references.

By 1911, 'Waltzing Matilda' was well-known, and was included in *The Australasian Students' Song Book*, with a musical arrangement by Marie Cowan. Five thousand copies were sold, and this popularized the song, to Christina Macpherson's delight. Also, 'Waltzing Matilda' was sung in the trenches during the First World War. In his poem, 'Singing Soldiers', C. J. Dennis recorded the singing of 'Waltzing Matilda' at Gallipoli in 1915.

In the 1960s a debate about the origin of the 'Waltzing Matilda' tune arose in academic circles. Paterson had been reticent and, amazingly, Christina Macpherson's part in the creation of the song dropped out of memory. It became a mystery, the subject of much research and speculation by folklorists and historians. Three books and several academic articles, written in the 1960s, and 70s suggested the origin, but none was correct.

Meanwhile, the historian and bush balladist, Richard Magoffin, had been sleuthing the mystery of the 'Waltzing Matilda' tune. In 1973 he published *Fair Dinkum Matilda*, then revised it and, in 1983, having contacted members of the Macpherson family for details, he published *Waltzing Matilda: Song of Australia*, at last placing Christina Macpherson in her rightful niche in history.

The last chapter of my compilation, *A Bluey of Swaggies* (1985), is titled 'The Story of Waltzing Matilda'. I remained intrigued over the years for I constantly heard and read about 'Banjo' Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda', and Christina Macpherson's name was never mentioned, even though Richard Magoffin had put an end to the controversy.

So, in 2002 I wrote the picture-story, *Christina's Matilda*, and I needed personal details about Christina. Richard Magoffin had stated that Mrs Diana Baillieu of Toorak was her great-niece, so I phoned. She invited me to her home to see unpublished historic photographs and documents, then lent these for copying. A warm and wonderful woman, Diana Baillieu (13.2.1915 – 20.4.2008) took a great interest in my book and the search for a publisher. When she died, aged 93, she knew that the manuscript had been accepted for publication, and she was thrilled.

A book's cover is hugely important. The title, *Christina's Matilda*, is feminine, so, as I wanted the book to appeal across the genders, I suggested that the illustration could be a photo of the statue, 'The Jolly Swagman', in Winton, Queensland. It had been commissioned to commemorate 'Waltzing Matilda' and was created by the sculptor Daphne Mayo in 1959, and dedicated to 'Banjo' Paterson and the many swagmen who lie in unmarked graves throughout Australia.

Christina's Matilda, is the first book for young people (aged ten years and over) to give detailed attention to Christina, and I hope that, eventually, there will be a statue of her opposite the one of 'Banjo' Paterson, sculpted by Daphne Mayo, standing beside the front door of the Waltzing Matilda Centre in Winton. This is the plan, if a sponsor can be found.

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