

## **Songs from the Australian Goldfields, Part 1: Gold mania**

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**M**ining history is recorded in a variety of forms, viz. the written word, visual (photographs, paintings and drawings) and orally (oral histories, poems and songs). Of these, it is the poems and songs that have often been overlooked. Yet, as observed by Stewart and Keesing, bush songs (which include mining songs) ‘are an interesting aspect of our social tradition and an important part of our literary heritage’.<sup>1</sup>

In 1901 Alfred Stephens, the influential critic and Literary Editor of *The Bulletin* (writing as *The Bookfellow*), said of the bushman’s song ‘[it] corresponds with picture-writing; it is the Word audible instead of the Word visible. He has to utter it in order to fully comprehend and feel’, and ‘it holds the writer’s virile Force: it is muscular and massive; if rough hewn, it is hewn from rock.’<sup>2</sup>

An example of this ‘picture-writing’ is the following song fragment with its conflicting emotions:

Coolgardie, Coolgardie, a wonderful spot  
Where the summer is burning and the winter is hot  
Where hundreds are suffering in miseries untold  
And the only thing is gold, gold, gold!

Music played a significant part in the life of the Australian digger, both around the campfire and performed by ‘professional’ entertainers. A visitor to goldfields in Victoria and New South Wales observed that:

Amusements are not much indulged in. Men come to work, not to play. Yet now and then a song is heard, with the notes of a violin and flute. In a tent near us was a oft-repeated concert nightly of a fife and tindish drum.<sup>3</sup>

John Sherer, on his return to England after achieving success on the Victorian goldfields, wrote that life, ‘even [on] the diggings, with all with their excitement’, needed relief from monotony and found it ‘in the music, the dancing, and the literature of the diggers’. Musical instruments were mainly accordions and flutes, and ‘here and there a stray fiddle might be heard within the precincts of some Irish tent, or a cornet-piston blowing mellowly from the lips of some German ...’. Singing might consist of a German hymn or an Anglo-Saxon capstan or windlass chorus. He also observed that ‘there were men who could make songs as well as sing them in that motley collection of many-coloured life’. To Sherer, the overall effect was a ‘living diorama ... which ... rendered it impossible to be dull, far less sorrowful, if you were possessed of any heart at all’.<sup>4</sup>

The songs made use of popular tunes of the times and most were by anonymous writers. Of those that were never published but handed down in the oral tradition, many have undoubtedly been lost. Others, again in the main anonymous, were published as

broadsides or in newspapers of the day and lay forgotten until rediscovered in recent years by folklorists and historians.<sup>5</sup> Other important sources were the song books of the goldfields entertainers Charles Thatcher, Joe Small, William Coxon and George Loyau (writing under the *nom de plume* of George Chanson). Thatcher (Fig. 1) was a particularly prolific songwriter, with songs of life, events and characters of the Victorian and New Zealand goldfields of the 1850s and 1860s; historians have described him as ‘the vocal equivalent of the artist S.T. Gill’.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1:** *Charles Robert Thatcher, 1869.*



Source: Courtesy, State Library of New South Wales. Image P1/1744.

But what of the literary merit of these songs? In addressing this question for bush songs and poems in general, Stewart and Keesing present a cogent case for their literary significance:

‘We do not have to be perturbed about the literary quality of the old songs and rhymes – which is sometimes, for all its simplicity, a very rich poetry of the Australian earth, and at other times so crude and naïve as to be valued only for its earthiness – but we can accept them all as folk-poetry, the first authentic voice of this continent: the basis upon which, reinforced by the more deliberate bush ballads of the school of “Banjo” Paterson, would be built a distinctively Australian literature’.<sup>7</sup>

This paper (Part 1 of 2) presents a selection of songs from some of the Australian goldfields. Because of space limitations, songs are not reproduced in full and choruses are omitted; complete texts can be found in the appropriate references.

### **The Rushes**

Although Edward Hargraves was not the first to find payable gold in Australia,<sup>8</sup> the first of the goldrushes followed publicity in early May 1851 of his report of gold in the Bathurst district of New South Wales.<sup>9</sup> The following decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were a period of great gold discoveries in Australia as prospectors scoured the country, leading to the spectacular discoveries of gold in Victoria in 1851, followed by a series of rushes in an anti-clockwise direction around the continent to new goldfields in the north and west, culminating with the discoveries of Coolgardie in 1892 and Kalgoorlie in 1893.<sup>10</sup>

Songs vividly reflect the mania created by the rushes as men left their families and employment and headed for the site of the latest find. Scott, writing at the turn of the century, described the goldrushes as:

that period in Australian history when the gold fever was badly abroad, and men were leaving everything – hearth, home, kin, and often life as well – to join the mad scurry after the will-o’-the-wisp which they were pleased to call fortune.<sup>11</sup>

Within a few weeks of the reports of Hargraves’ discoveries, songs were appearing about the rush to Ophir. One such song was published in *Bell’s Sydney Life and Sporting Reviewer* on 31 May 1851, under the heading *On the Gold-digging Epidemic now raging in New South Wales*.<sup>12</sup>

It’s off to the diggings we’ll go,  
Whether they let us or no.  
We’ll scramble for gold  
Through wet, dirt or cold,  
And it’s off to the diggings we’ll go.

It’s off to the diggings we’ll go,  
And perhaps without striking a blow  
We may fill up our bags,  
And then mounting some nags,  
We’ll cut to the .... oh oh.

Gold’s called the elixir of life;  
It certainly causes some strife;

Some of the turmoil created by the goldrushes can be appreciated in these verses from *New Words to an Old Song*, again about the rush to Ophir, and written by William Walker ‘on the breaking out of the Gold Diggings, 1851’.<sup>13</sup>

The world is now turned upside-down,  
And everything seems queer,  
For all the men are leaving town,  
And prog<sup>14</sup> gets dreadful dear.

To talk of love now no one thinks,  
The men have got so cold  
Their heads are stuffed with nothing, but –  
This cursed, filthy gold.

A woman’s voice sounds dull and tame,  
In her no charm now lives;  
But spades and picks are harmony,  
And gold the music gives.

*A Song of The Ophir* by Henry Monks (‘a plain hardworking hand’) was also published in *Bell’s Sydney Life and Sporting Reviewer*, along with a comment from the editor that the song was ‘... the production of an illiterate man; and although the lines do not possess much poetic merit, yet they afford a good graphic description of the Diggings, the Diggers and their doings’.<sup>15</sup> It is a lengthy song but the following verse illustrates how the rush was affecting one and all.

So on my nag I mounted and with full supplies I started  
But I was nearly turning back through jests as I departed:  
My master swore that I was mad, my mistress that I was raving:-  
Thinks I, I'm not the only fool for yellow metal craving:  
There's parsons, clerks, J.P.s and all togg'd out in mining rigging  
Just rushing fit to break their necks to Ophir gold mine digging.

Another lengthy song about the Bathurst district is *The Rush to Glanmire* which records the hopes of a would-be digger.<sup>16</sup>

Oh listen brother diggers all,  
I hope I shall not tire;  
I'll tell of my adventures when  
I went to the Glanmire.  
The news of gold inflam'd my heart  
With some most strange desire;  
And I left Sydney town by rail,  
To go to the Glanmire.

But with lack of success after exhausting work in harsh conditions he soon became discouraged.

Oh, right and left, my luck I tried,  
And found it wouldn't pay;  
My hands were blister'd as I sank  
About two feet a day.  
My back ached as I dug for gold,  
And much I did perspire;  
I wished myself in Sydney town,  
Away from the Glanmire.

He returned disheartened to Sydney with this warning to others thinking of joining the rush.

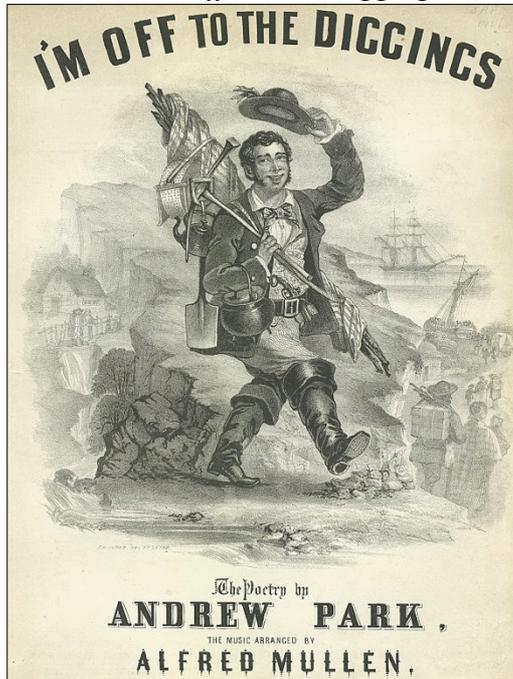
So all new chums who think to try  
At Glanmire for good luck;  
Don't heed the tidings which have come  
Of new leads being struck.  
Be warn'd by my disasters there,  
And if you do require  
A change of life, don't waste your time  
In going to Glanmire.

The discoveries of rich alluvial gold in Central Victoria in mid-1851 led to great excitement, not only in the Australian colonies but also overseas, as can be seen in *I'm off to The Diggings*<sup>17</sup> published in London (Fig. 2), and which begins:

I'm off to the diggings, pick cradle and spade,  
For who but a bumpkin would stick to his trade?  
I'm off to the diggings to gather the gold,  
For the wealth of Australia has never been told!

I've got my revolver, my tent and tea kettle,  
My blankets and bed, and boots that are strong.  
With a crucible ready to solve the bright metal,  
I'm off bag and baggage to dig at Geelong!

**Figure 2:** Title page to music score of 'I'm off to The Diggings'.



Source: Courtesy, National Library of Australia,  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2334421>

part in the Victorian goldrush.<sup>19</sup> Like many others, he went from one goldfield to another, following the latest rush and when alluvial mining declined and gave way to reef mining he abandoned the life of a digger and became a swagman.

When first I left Old England's shore,  
Such yarns as we were told,  
As how folks in Australia  
Could pick up lumps of gold.  
So, when we got to Melbourne town,  
We were ready soon to slip  
And get even with the captain -  
All hands scuttled from the ship.

We steered our course for Geelong town,  
Then north-west to Ballarat,  
Where some of us got mighty thin,  
And some got sleek and fat.  
Some tried their luck at Bendigo,  
And some at Fiery Creek;  
I made a fortune in a day  
And spent it in a week.

Similar expressions of unbounded optimism are seen in *Australia's Our Home*, a broadside printed in England, c.1854.<sup>18</sup>

Here's off, here's off to the diggings of gold,  
Australia's our home where wealth is untold;  
Up, up, with your picks, take your shovel in hand.  
Here's off, here's off to a happier land.  
We dread not the voyage, though distant and long,  
We've a compass to steer by, our arms they are strong.  
And ne'er into misery unheeded we'll fall,  
While Melbourne's rich gold fields are open to all.

*With my swag all on my shoulder* follows the adventures of an emigrant who joined those leaving England to take

For many years I wandered round,  
As each new rush broke out,  
And always had of gold a pound,  
Till alluvial petered out.  
'Twas then we took the bush to cruise,  
Glad to get a bite to eat;  
The squatters treated us so well  
We made a regular beat.

Some of Thatcher's songs describe how many diggers, on hearing of a new find, would hastily abandon a field to join the latest rush. In *Bryant's Ranges* he reported that Bendigo was being deserted as the diggers departed for the Tarrangower Goldfield at Maldon.<sup>20</sup>

Oh, what a curious world this is,  
So various in its changes;  
I'm alluding to the rush.  
Down there on Bryant's Ranges,  
The diggers are hastening there,  
As fast as they are able:  
With tent and pick, and puddling tub,  
And dish, and spade, and cradle.

The White Hills now appear quite blue,  
There's few left in that quarter;  
Sailor's Gully's short of hands,  
But Long Gully is much shorter.  
And on Commissioner's Flat as well,  
A very striking change is;  
And all the world is hastening,  
To the rush on Bryant's Ranges.

Thatcher also mocked the diggers' propensity to blindly follow the latest rush, an example being *The Rush to Dunolly*.<sup>21</sup>

Oh what a great row is kicked up just now;  
Strange reports all about here are flying;  
New diggings are found, and to rush to the ground  
Great numbers of people are dying.  
They don't wait to enquire, but seem all on fire;  
But to hurry away thus is folly,  
For numbers they say come back every day,  
And give bad accounts of Dunolly.

At Dunolly we're told there is plenty of gold,  
But the job is to know where to strike it.  
Forty feet you go down and find you're done brown  
When the color ain't there you don't like it.  
A nugget is found, and they rush all the ground,  
But lots of 'em look melancholy,  
And with hearts full of woe back to Bendigo go  
And regret that they went to Dunolly.

The final verse advised diggers to stay in Bendigo rather than join the rush to Dunolly.

Where there's ground here to pay I advise you to stay;  
Your ear to reports don't be giving.  
This ancient goldfield still is able to yield  
To any poor man a good living.  
Rush away if you like it, but if you don't strike it;  
You'll have no one to blame for your folly.  
When you find you've done wrong you'll think of my song  
As you trudge slowly back from Dunolly.

In the late 1850s the search moved north to the Tropic of Capricorn; Coxon's song *The Rush to Port Curtis* illustrates the frenzy of the rush.<sup>22</sup>

Everybody's complaining that Ballarat's dull,  
That but stagnation nothing is stirring,  
That the papers with bankruptcy cases are full,  
And failures quite daily occurring;  
And now to mend matters the cry is *Rush, oh*,  
And to each one to *slither* alert is,  
And by coach or wagon right slick off they go  
To Melbourne, and ship to Port Curtis.

Servant girls joined the rush, along with men from all walks of life.

The servant girls are just as bad as the men,  
And their places have left and deserted,  
Say "they will no longer work like slaveys, when  
Into ladies they can be converted."

The Policemen too have the fever all caught,  
And likewise all the Tailors and Cobblers,  
A Publican also has left for the Port,  
Who intends to sell sixpenny nobblers.

The 1870s saw the Palmer goldrush as diggers pushed to the Far North of Queensland. In *Colonial Born*, Scott weaves a tale of 'Palmer Billy' singing *The Golden Gullies of the Palmer* around the campfire to a group on their way to the Palmer (Fig. 3). Speculation about what lay ahead was interrupted by

one of the new arrivals producing an accordion from his swag, and sounding a couple of chords. At once the attention of the men was taken off the topic of the new field; there was a want of alcohol in the camp wherewith to rouse their spirits to the full enjoyment of their new good fortune, but the melody of accordion and song made an excellent substitute.<sup>23</sup>

The song is typical, of goldrush songs in its outlandish claims of the riches to be had.<sup>24</sup>

Then roll the swag and blanket up,  
And let us haste away  
To the Golden Palmer, boys,  
Where everyone, they say,  
Can get an ounce of gold, or

It may be more, a day,  
In the Golden Gullies of the Palmer.

Then sound the chorus once again  
And give to it a roar,  
And let its echoes ring, boys,  
Upon the sea and shore,  
Until it reach the mountains,  
Where gold is in galore  
In the Golden Gullies of the Palmer.

*The Old Palmer Song*<sup>25</sup> reflects the optimism and determination of the diggers to overcome the anticipated hazards of the terrain; it also makes mention of conflict with Aborigines who resisted the invasion of their land by prospectors.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 3:** 'Billy Palmer' singing 'The Golden Gullies of the Palmer'.



Source: G. Firth Scott, *Colonial Born: a tale of the Queensland bush*, Sampson Low, London, 1900, Opposite p. 56.

The wind is fair and free, my boys,  
The wind is fair and free;  
The steamer's course is north, my boys,  
And the Palmer we will see.  
And the Palmer we will see, my boys,  
And Cooktown's muddy shore,  
Where I've been told there's lots of gold  
So stay down south no more.

I hear the blacks are troublesome,  
And spear both horse and man,  
The rivers are all wide and deep,  
No bridges them do span.  
No bridges them do span, my boys,  
And so you'll have to swim,  
But never fear the yarns you hear  
And gold you're sure to win.

...In spite of blacks and unknown tracks,  
We'll show what we can do.

In *New Song for Western Australia* published in *The Herald* (Fremantle) in December 1873, the discovery of gold was announced and great changes predicted for the colony.<sup>27</sup>

Hurra! for the gold which at last is found,  
And hurra! for our Western Australia;  
Our long defer'd hopes at last are as sound  
Ay! as sound as the gold of Australia.

The time has now come for the changes so great  
Yes, the changes for Western Australia;  
Our bright dreams are true, altho' rather late,  
Yes, the gold dreams of Western Australia.

Discovery of gold at Coolgardie led to a rush that attracted men from all parts of Australia but they needed to be hardy to withstand the harsh environment. As explained

by Blainey, the ‘eastward drive of the gold-seekers had halted at Southern Cross in 1888’ and the ‘break through the desert was one of the hardest tasks in the history of Australian prospecting’.<sup>28</sup> The optimism and courage of the diggers are reflected in *Hurrah for Old Coolgardie*.<sup>29</sup>

Hurrah! for old Coolgardie,  
All true men brave and hardy;  
Roll up your swags and come along,  
With smiling faces and lively song:  
Come, all men true and hardy,  
Let’s start for old Coolgardie.

Ne’er heed the heat, ne’er heed the sand,  
For are we not a jolly band:  
Come, all men true and hardy,  
Haste up for old Coolgardie.

See! There’s the place, I’ll shout my boys,  
They’ve nuggets there to crown our joys;  
Come, all men true and hardy,  
For, there, stands old Coolgardie.

*The Golden West*, one of the songs performed by an itinerant singer who called himself ‘Gilligan’, laments the loss of lives in the rush that took place in the unforgiving conditions in Western Australia.<sup>30</sup>

Out on the Western Diggings,  
That land of sand and gold  
Our plucky lads they ventured.  
Their lives for wealth untold.  
Mothers mourn their manly sons  
And wives their husbands dear,  
And daughters mourn their sweethearts true,  
They’ll never more be near.

Onwards in the strife for riches,  
Onward in the strife for gain,  
Surely virgin gold bewitches  
But it causes tears and pain.  
Many a silent grave it tells  
Of the miners long long rest,  
While others on the plains are bleaching,  
Beneath the skies of the Golden West.

### **Successes and Failures**

Although many diggers made their fortune on the goldfields there were many more that made little. Songs record a variety of experiences, both success and failure. In *The Land of Gold* (written by Pat Finn and ‘sung everywhere with success by Will Danvers’) we hear of a digger who joined the rush to Victoria and whose hopes were indeed fulfilled.<sup>31</sup>

I'm only a digger – I arrived years ago  
When your land did its treasures unfold,  
And all eyes on Australia were instantly turned,  
At the cry of the magic word, "Gold"!  
Your streets golden pavements were said to possess,  
Men were all making fortunes untold;  
So I, with the gold fever then at its height,  
Came, with others, in search of your gold.

Gold, gold, gold, this I would get I was told,  
So out to seek my fortune I came in the days of old.  
Gold! gold! gold!!!  
The treasure I did behold,  
And I got more than my share of it  
In this the land of gold.  
Gold, gold, gold, in riches the whole of us rolled –  
Why we'd light our pipes with ten pun' notes  
In the good old days of old.

*The Digger's New Year's Song* describes how a group of miners toiled without success until late in the Old Year and having at last struck gold were determined that all around them would join in celebrating the advent of the New Year and the good luck they were sure lay ahead.<sup>32</sup>

Come pass the glasses round, my boys.  
The Old Year's waning fast;  
Let's make the best of present joys,  
We've struck the gold at last!  
We fear no more dark days of toil,  
Like those through which we've passed.  
Hard times that tried our hopes to foil –  
We've struck the gold at last!

We dug and drilled, for many days,  
Through stone without a seam;  
Our shots went off with sullen blaze  
That left no golden gleam.  
The year was one of banished joys,  
But now our trouble's past;  
Hip, hip. Hurrah! Hurrah! my boys –  
We've struck the gold at last!

Go, call in all our friends around,  
Sing out down every shaft,  
Let mirth and joy with all abound,  
The sparkling cup be quaffed;  
The Old Year's gone with all bad luck,  
The New will sunshine cast;  
Our tedious toll is all repaid –  
We've struck the gold at last!

The exuberance of the previous song contrasts with the feelings of disappointment and despair expressed by the unsuccessful Hookam Snivey in *A True and Doleful Ditty: Being an account of the Haps and Mis-haps, Chances and Mis-Chances of a Penitent Digger*, published in a Perth newspaper in 1852.<sup>33</sup>

All you on diggin firmly fix'd,  
Before you grasp your metal picks,  
Oh list to what I'm going to say  
And ponder on my doleful lay.  
Of what befell poor hapless me,  
Being tempted once to cross the sea,  
To get to far-famed Ballarat.

When I got there, oh! such a scene.  
I ne'er could fancy could have been;  
Such guys and frights soon met my eyes,  
All eager for the golden prize,

I found a spot on which to fix  
My first essay with spade and picks,  
And taking off my coat began  
To work like any labouring man,  
And soon the sweat began to pour,  
Whilst delving for the golden ore,  
With other fools at Ballarat.

I dug and dug throughout the day,  
From morning's rise till its decay,  
And when the shades of evening fell,  
My back – oh Lord! and hands as well!  
And nought of nugget could I see,  
No lucky chance had hap'd to me,  
In digging gold at Ballarat.

Next day, I was of pains and aches,  
Rheumatic fever and the shakes,  
Confined to my cosy bed  
Of mother earth, the sky o'er head,  
All black with heavy falling rain,  
Which doubly did increase my pain,  
In the cursed hole at Ballarat.

Blainey described the Port Curtis rush as 'the most disillusioning rush in Australia's history'<sup>34</sup> and Coxon's song *The Port Curtis Letter* demonstrates how quickly hopes for the new field faded.<sup>35</sup>

There came a tale to Melbourne, of *piles* that had been won,  
Out at this great Port Curtis, which made the people run,  
And on the wharves all day too, where crowds of diggers seen  
Whose cry was "At Port Curtis to try our luck we mean."  
There came a tale to Melbourne in ten days more or so,  
That the *rush* had turned out *pickles* and Port Curtis was *no go* –

That there was lots of sickness, but little gold yet seen,  
And that this great Port Curtis was not at all *serene*.  
Then wrote a Ballarat man (and God's blessing on his pen.)  
"I plainly tell those diggers - those *soft, sold, and suck'd in* men,  
That Ballarat contains more gold as yet unseen,  
Than this crack'd up Port Curtis does, where they've just rushing been."

It would have been the dream of most emigrants joining the goldrush to Australia to return home after making their fortune. Here, too, we find a variety of experiences recorded in song. *Pint Pot and Billy* tells of a successful digger who on returning home felt a misfit and lamented having left Australia.<sup>36</sup>

I dined with the swells in famed Piccadilly,  
Took tea with my cousins in Horsemonger Lane  
And now I am stranded on my own native shore,  
I'll go back to Australia to the goldfields again.

When I asked for a nobbler they asked what I meant, Sir,  
I called them 'new chums' and that served them right

In one of Thatcher's best-known songs, *Look out below*, we also have a young man who returned home after making his fortune, but soon decided not to stay.<sup>37</sup>

A young man left his native shores,  
For trade was bad at home;  
To seek his fortune in this land,  
He crossed the briny foam:  
And when he went to Ballarat,  
It put him in a glow,  
To hear the sound of the windlasses,  
And the cry "look out below."

Amongst the rest he took his chance,  
And his luck at first was vile;  
But he still resolved to persevere,  
And at length he made his pile.  
So says he I'll take my passage,  
And home again I'll go,  
And I'll say farewell to the windlasses,  
And the cry "look out below".

Back in London he spent his gold freely and indulged in every 'gaiety and dissipation' but before long became bored; he still had the gold fever and missed the sound of the windlasses and the cry 'look out below!' and returned to Australia.

So he started for this land again,  
With a charming little wife;  
And he finds there's nothing comes up to  
A jolly digger's life.  
Ask him if he'll go back again,  
He'll quickly answer, no;  
For he loves the sound of the windlasses,  
And the cry "look out below".

In contrast, *Mines of Australia* is a sad tale of two young men, friends from school days, who left for Australia to escape the hard times in England.<sup>38</sup> The wording of the song is open to interpretation and Fahey has speculated that one of the pair may have been murdered by his mate.

I sailed to the west with a schoolmate of mine  
And together we shared the hard toil.  
It was hard times at home that caused us to roam,  
No work for the sons of the soil.  
So I bade my old father and mother goodbye,  
And said I'll not be long away;  
For ten years have passed, fortune's favoured at last  
And I'm leaving Australia today.

I sailed to the west with a dear pal of mine,  
Each having a share in one claim  
And taking bad luck as it came with the rest,  
And working on just the same  
Till a cowardly blow struck my poor pal low,  
Who struck him I never could tell;  
But the share of his gold placed close to my heart  
For mother and dear sister, Nell.

Well I'm going back to my dear old home  
That's far away over the sea  
Right back to the scenes of my childhood  
Where there'll be a welcome for me

Those returning home faced a hazardous sea journey and not all arrived safely. One major tragedy recorded in song was that of *The Royal Charter*,<sup>39</sup> wrecked in the early hours of the morning of 26<sup>th</sup> October 1859, with the loss of over 400 lives when a fierce storm in the Irish Sea drove it on to rocks on the northern coast of Wales. As well as the crew and passengers, many of whom were returning from the goldfields, it was carrying gold estimated to be valued at several hundred thousand pounds sterling; one passenger alone was reported to have 'had himself £10,000 on board'.<sup>40</sup>

Good people all, attend I pray;  
Now I'll relate a sad calamity  
Of a dreadful shipwreck near Belmore Town  
Of the *Royal Charter* while homeward bound.

From fair Australia with a pleasant gale  
The *Royal Charter* for old England sailed  
With a human cargo, her fate did rule  
We ne'er but one reached Liverpool.

On Tuesday morning, I'm grieved to say,  
Our fore and mainmast were cut away,  
When our mizzentop fell with a heavy crash,  
And in the raging sea our ship did dash.

Now broadside on she drove on shore,  
The lightning flashed and the sea did roar.  
Brave Captain Taylor drowned, 'tis true,  
With ninety-seven of his gallant crew.

Now the total number that lost their lives  
Was four hundred and fifty-five;  
Of women and children we are assured  
Not one escaped out of all on board.

Divers subsequently recovered 23 boxes of gold, 199 bars, 3371 sovereigns, 38 half-sovereigns, and 414 pounds weight of gold dust from the wreck of the *Royal Charter* and also reported that 'the ground about where the stern of the ship lies is rich with gold dust, and must be dug up and sent to London to be properly washed'.<sup>41</sup>

A particularly gruesome tale is that of the *Sea Horse* which, according to a broadside printed c.1854, sailed from Sydney with thirteen passengers, some of whom were returning home with gold won on the Victorian diggings. Four of the crew hatched a plot to murder the passengers and other crew members. The ship was 'in sight of the white cliffs of Old England' when the murderers struck, cutting the throats and mutilating the bodies of their victims and escaping with 18,000 ozs of gold. Only one man survived, by hiding in the hold, and was able to relate the story to members of the crew of another ship, the *Sarah Ann*, who went on board to investigate the abandoned vessel.<sup>42</sup>

You landsmen and seamen bold,  
Attention give to me,  
While I a tragedy unfold,  
Upon the briney sea;  
In the German ocean it occurred,  
Near the sight of land,  
Twenty-eight fell victims  
To the cursed murderous hands.

The *Sea Horse* from Sydney sailed,  
Bound for Old England's shore,  
With crew and thirteen passengers,  
Whose fate we now deplore;  
Returning home with hard earned gold  
Across the briney main,  
But alas! The ones they loved at home,  
They ne'er will see again.

Four of the crew they laid a plan,  
The passengers to slay.  
And with the gold they dearly earnt,  
O'er the seas to bear away;  
These murderers were led away.  
All by their thirst for gold,  
And their victims they did cruelly slay,  
Most shocking to unfold.

In some grog they mixed some laudanum  
And soon they fell asleep,  
And then these wretched monsters  
To their victims' berths did creep;  
Then to the Captain's cabin,  
Intent on blood did steer,  
And mangled his poor body,  
How dreadful for to hear.

There were no reports in Australian newspapers of this massacre, as would surely have been expected; the events described in text and song in the broadside are most likely fictitious.

### Summary

Songwriters on the goldfields have left us a record of the rushes and fortunes or failures of those hardy prospectors who risked all as they criss-crossed the continent in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in search of new fields. What the songs may have lacked in literary quality was more than compensated for by way of enthusiasm and intensity of emotions expressed. This can be seen in the following extract from Sherer, in which he describes an evening of singing by a group of diggers camped on their way from Castlemaine to Bendigo.

There was such a heartiness and zest thrown into [the song] by the generality of these rough children of toil, that no refinement could have produced half the effect which the rude and jovial strength of their own ideas of melody could convey.<sup>43</sup>

At first, musical entertainment on the goldfields was entirely informal, in the diggers' tents or around the campfire, but with the arrival of balladeers such Thatcher there was the addition of entertainment in the somewhat more formal setting of hotel venues. The contribution of both forms as a record of life on the goldfields will be explored further in Part 2 of this paper.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Stewart and Nancy Keesing, *Old Bush Songs and Rhymes of Colonial Times: enlarged and revised from the collection of A.B. Paterson*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1957, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> *The Bulletin*, 29 June 1901, p. 2 ('The Red Page').

<sup>3</sup> *The Southern Argus and River Murray Advertiser*, 14 October 1880, p. 4. The adventures of a party of six South Australians to the Snowy River gold diggings, in the Alpine regions of Australia, Part IV, Diary of J.L. Dawesley.

<sup>4</sup> John Sherer, *The Gold-Finder in Australia: how he went, how he fared, how he made his fortune*, Penguin Colonial Facsimile, Dominion Press, Blackburn, Victoria, 1973, pp. 75, 239. First published by Clarke, Beeton & Co, London, 1853.

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive compilation of goldfields songs, including many recently rediscovered, see Warren Fahey, *The World Turned Upside-down: The Australian Gold Rush told through songs, stories & reminiscences*, Published as an e-book by Bodgie Books, Sydney, 2013, 172pp.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Anderson, in Noel Bede Nairn (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 6, 1851-1890, R-Z, Melbourne University Press, 1976, p. 260.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart and Keesing, *Old Bush Songs and Rhymes of Colonial Times*, p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Hargraves found gold at Lewis Ponds Creek and Yorkey's Corner in the Bathurst district on 12 February 1851, but William Tipple Smith had found gold at the same locality in 1848 and a shepherd boy named

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Chapman had found gold near the present town of Amherst in Victoria in 1849. See, Geoffrey Blainey, *The Rush That Never Ended, A History of Australian Mining*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1964, pp. 9, 11.

<sup>9</sup> *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 May 1851, p. 3; *The Bathurst Free Press*, 10 May 1851, pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> R. Woodall, *Gold in Australia*, in F.E. Hughes (ed.), *Geology of the Mineral Deposits of Australia and Papua New Guinea*, Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy, Melbourne, 1990, p. 45; J.D. Campbell, *Gold ore deposits of Australia*, in *Geology of Australian Ore Deposits*, in J. McAndrew (ed.), Eighth Commonwealth Mining and Metallurgical Congress, Melbourne, 1965, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> G. Firth Scott, *Colonial Born: a tale of the Queensland bush*, Sampson Low, London, 1900, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Bell's Sydney Life and Sporting Reviewer*, 31 May 1851, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> William Walker, *Poems Written in Youth*, 1884, Turner & Henderson, Sydney, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Prog is an early slang word for food. See, Jonathon Green, *Green's Dictionary of Slang*, Chambers Harrap, London, 2010, v. 3, p. 326.

<sup>15</sup> *Bell's Sydney Life and Sporting Reviewer*, 16 August 1851, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> George Chanson, *The Sydney Songster, No.1: a collection of new original, local and comic songs*, D. Roberts, Sydney, c.1869, p. 6. For the rush to the Glanmire Diggings see, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 June 1865, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *I'm off to The Diggings*, poetry by Andrew Park, music arranged by Alfred Mullen, B. Williams, London, c.1852, 3pp. See <http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/27294649>, accessed Feb. 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh Anderson, *Farewell to Old England: A Broadside History of Early Australia*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1964, p. 189.

<sup>19</sup> A.B. Paterson (ed.), *The Old Bush Songs: composed and sung in the bushranging, digging and overlanding days*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, 1932, pp. 63-64. There are several versions of this song, e.g. in Warren Fahey, *Eureka - the songs that made Australia*, Omnibus Press, 1984, p. 76, the title of the song is *Denis O'Reilly* and begins 'When first I left old Ireland's shore ...'.

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Anderson, *Goldfield songs by Charles Thatcher*, Red Rooster Press, Hotham Hill, 2001, pp. 27-28.

<sup>21</sup> *The Bendigo Advertiser*, 20 September 1856, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> William Coxon, *Coxon's Comic Songster*, W.M. Brown, Ballarat, c.1859, pp. 32-33. The Port Curtis field was also known variously as Canoona, Fitzroy River and Rockhampton.

<sup>23</sup> Firth Scott, *Colonial Born*, p. 54.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56-58.

<sup>25</sup> J. Manifold, *The Penguin Australian Song Book*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria, 1964, pp. 38-39.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of the confrontation between miners and Aborigines see, for example, Henry Reynolds, *Forgotten War*, New South Publishing, Sydney, 2013, pp. 76, 94.

<sup>27</sup> *The Herald* (Fremantle), 13 December 1873, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Blainey, *The Rush That Never Ended*, p. 172.

<sup>29</sup> *The Inquirer and Commercial News* (Perth), 9 February 1894, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Ron Edwards, *The Big Book of Australian Folk Song*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1976, p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> *The Australian Melodist*, no. 21, c.1880, pp. 47-48.

<sup>32</sup> *Evening News* (Sydney), 1 January 1876, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Inquirer* (Perth), 20 October 1852, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Blainey, *The Rush That Never Ended*, p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> *Coxon's Comic Songster*, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> Fahey, *The World Turned Upside-down*, p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Thatcher, *Thatcher's Colonial Songs: forming a complete comic history of the early diggings*, 1864, p. 93. Facsimile edition, Libraries Board of South Australia, 1964.

<sup>38</sup> Fahey, *The World Turned Upside-down*, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup> E.J. Moeran, 'Songs collected in Norfolk', *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, vol. vii, 1922, pp. 1-24. *The Royal Charter* (pp. 6-7) was collected by Moeran in 1915 from James Sutton of Winterton, Norfolk.

<sup>40</sup> *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, 14 January 1860, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Charles Hindley, *Curiosities of Street Literature*, Reeves and Turner, London, 1871, p. 6, cited in Hugh Anderson, *Farewell to Old England*, pp. 198-200, and available online at [http://archive.org/stream/curiositiesofstr00hinduoft/curiositiesofstr00hinduoft\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/curiositiesofstr00hinduoft/curiositiesofstr00hinduoft_djvu.txt), accessed Feb. 2015. The date of the alleged massacre is not stated but the broadside was published c.1854 (see, Anderson, p. 211).

<sup>43</sup> Sherer, *The Gold-Finder in Australia*, p. 240.