Factsheet 12 – Why is a song about a sheep thief so popular?

Quirky fact:
‘Waltzing Matilda’ is widely considered the unofficial anthem of Australia, despite being overlooked by the public as its choice for a national anthem in the 1974 and 1977 Referenda.

Australian Curriculum Links

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Background Information

The song ‘Waltzing Matilda’ embodies the Australian spirit and has played a significant part in defining the Australian character. Written by A.B. ‘Banjo’ Paterson in January 1895, the words were inspired when he was staying with the Macpherson family on Dagworth Station, north-west of Winton. Christina Macpherson is thought to have written the tune, adapting the Scottish march, ‘Thou Bonnie Wood of Craigielea’, to accompany the words.

The phrase Waltzing Matilda is believed to have originated from German immigrants. Waltzing (auf der walz) meant ‘to go on the tramp’. In those days, apprentices would travel throughout Germany and to other European countries to gain experience in their trade, finding work with master craftsmen and sleeping wherever they could. The word Matilda is from Teutonic origin meaning Mighty Battle Maiden – the name given to the women that followed the soldiers in the thirty year European war. The Matildas were like de-facto wives that kept their soldiers warm at night. The soldiers soon came to nickname their grey army coats Matildas and then, much later in Australia, Matilda was adopted as the name for a swag or blanket that was usually carried over the shoulder. Hence, Waltzing Matilda means to go walkabout looking for a job with your tools of trade and the things that keep you warm at night.

Historians believe the song was first performed publicly at the North Gregory Hotel in Winton, on 6 April 1895, apparently at a banquet for the then Premier of Queensland.

There are various interpretations of the meaning behind the song, ranging from those that say it is based around the conflict of the Great Shearers’ Strike (1891 – 1894), to those that believe it was a simple ditty written by Banjo Paterson to win the admiration and eye of a woman.
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Inquiry Questions

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Points of Interest

- The Waltzing Matilda Centre is the only museum in the world dedicated to a song. Self-guided tours allow you to experience this multi award-winning attraction at your own pace.

  50 Elderslie Street, Winton QLD 4735
  Cost: Entry fee applies
  Hours: Open daily from 9.00am to 5.00pm
  Phone: 1300 665 115
  Email: waltzing@matildacentre.com.au
  Website: www.matildacentre.com.au

- The Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum, Winton
- Royal Open Air Theatre and Museum, Winton
- Dinosaur Stampede at Lark Quarry Conservation Park

Additional Resources

Waltzing Matilda
Music and words – various renditions
www.hamilton.net.au/matilda.html

References


National Library of Australia

Roger Clarke’s Waltzing Matilda Home Page
www.rogerclarke.com/WM/

Further Information

Waltzing Matilda Centre
PO Box 286, Winton QLD 4735
Phone: 1300 665 115
www.experiencewinton.com.au