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The "Cultural Landscape" of Australia in Bush Ballads: Slim Dusty's *Aussie Sing Song*

Abstract

The concept of the "cultural landscape" designates tangible and intangible elements of human activity, such as the natural environment, material culture, values, behaviours, and language (Taylor 2008, 6; Taylor and Lennon 2011, 538–540; Wierzbicka 1997, 201). These themes are all present in Australian bush ballads – a literary and folk genre that reflects the country's unique heritage and way of life in simple artistic forms. Slim Dusty's *Aussie Sing Song* (1962) – a representative selection of ballads – depicts Australia's fauna and flora, the Aborigines, the beginnings of European settlement, the economy, the Great Outback, and the social role of drinking beer. The popular texts contain condensed and vivid images of the country's culture.

Following Mechtild Rössler,[1] Ken Taylor defines the "cultural landscape" as "a closely woven net of relationships, the essence of culture and people's identity" that functions "at the interface of culture and nature, tangible and intangible heritage, biological and cultural diversity" (2008, 6). It encompasses both static and dynamic elements, for example beliefs, behaviours, and symbols, which the anthropological linguist Franz Boas regarded as the "cultural traits of societies" (qtd. in Taylor 2008, 5). A typical "cultural landscape" is a multi-layered construct which reflects human history and activity: urban and rural elements, the material culture, values, and ideologies; as such, it forms the essence of national identity (Taylor and Lennon 2011, 538–540). It reflects "everyday ways of life" and "the sequence or rhythm of life over time," offers "a sense of continuity," as well as a "context setting for cultural heritage" (Taylor 2008, 5). Boas and other anthropological linguists (Whorf; Sapir) also emphasized the role of language as a vehicle and reflection of cultural values.

The cultural landscape of Australia thus forms the foundation of the country's "sense of identity and Australianness" (Taylor 1994; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1997, 200). It comprises "grandiose homesteads and urban splendours, the Aboriginal

wonders of Kakadu, or the Sydney Opera House […] the memories of European exploration, convict settlements […] gold mining […] and urban areas with rich social tapestry" (Taylor 1994; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1997, 201). Anna Wierzbicka adds language as "a key to Australia's history and an important factor in national identity" (1997, 201). She sees "language as a mirror of culture and a part of culture" (1992, 373). Australian English is closely related to British English (Jenkins 72–74). Kiesling (75–76) mentions "the founder effect" (Mufwene 84) of southeast English and the area of London on it. The language emerged as a result of levelling of varieties of English used by convicts, prison officers, the clergy, and various other settlers (Burridge and Mulder; qtd. in Rozumko 275). As a local dialect, Australian English is similar to Afrikaans/South-African Dutch and American English: the former reflects a cultural landscape different from that of the Low Countries (Dirven; qtd. in Kövecses 188; Branford); the latter has many expressions motivated by the context of the moving frontier and the contact with the natives, for example *to have an axe to grind*, *to face the music*, *to go on the warpath*, *to bury the hatchet*, *to saw wood*, etc. (Baugh and Cable; qtd. in Kövecses 188).

Images of cultural landscapes are present in literature, paintings, myths, and advertising (Taylor 2008, 3). They are common in works of high artistic quality, as well as in popular creations. A ballad narrates a folk story by means of action and dialogue (Abrams 18). The bush ballad, a specifically Australian genre, depicts such aspects of bush life as the nature of the land, the frontier, mining, sheep shearing, and driving cattle. It narrates a story in colloquial, humorous, and idiomatic language, using simple rhymes and melody lines. As an emblem of Australia's popular culture, it is an expression of the spirit of the nation ("Bush Ballad"; "Bush-Ballads"). Andrew B. "Banjo" Paterson (1864–1941) was one of the most famous poets of the bush; Buddy Williams (1918–1986), Slim Dusty (1927–2003), and Rolf Harris (b. 1930) were the most popular performers of those songs. *Slim Dusty and His Bushlanders. Aussie Sing Song* (1962) is a representative selection of bush ballads. Though composed by various authors, the sing-song jointly reflects the cultural landscape of the land.

As the natural landscape is a precondition for the emergence and evolution of the cultural landscape (Sauer; qtd. in Taylor, 2008, 6), many of its elements appear in bush-ballads. Images of fauna, flora, and permanent or temporary landmarks are frequent and often overlap. "Boomerang" mentions kangaroos, which for many people are prototypical Australian animals: "I asked an old dark man where the kangaroo got its tail, / And he told me as only a dark fella can, / They shipped them in on the Birdsville mail" (1962). The Birdsville mail is a major stock and mail route in the Outback ("Birdsville Track," 1962), where the kangaroos are common. "I'm Going Back Again to Yarrawonga," which compares the Australian countryside to Tennessee and Carolina in the United States, ends with a description of the place as "the land of the kangaroo" (1962). Kangaroos appear

among other common Australian animals in "Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport," originally performed by Rolf Harris and being a worldwide hit in the early 1960s (Matthews 14). A dying stockman gives advice to his mates:

> Watch me wallabies feed, mate,
> Watch me wallabies feed.
> Tie me kangaroo down, sport,
> Tie me kangaroo down.
> Keep me cockatoo cool, Curl,
> Keep me cockatoo cool.
> N' take me koala back, Jack,
> Take me koala back. (1962)

Cockatoos and koalas may be representative of Australia, but kangaroo is the most popular symbol of the country. Quantas – one of Australia's major airlines – has one as logo on its planes. The expressions *have kangaroos in the top paddock* 'be insane' and *be on the wallaby track* 'be looking for work' (Rozumko 277) are common metaphor-based idioms that describe human actions by means of reference to the animal. "A Pub with No Beer," in turn, mentions dingoes – another animal typical of Australia: "It's lonesome away from your kindred and all, / By the campfires at night where the wild dingoes call" (1962). The stereotypical behaviour of the wild dog also motivates numerous idioms, for example *dingo's breakfast* 'no breakfast,' *turn dingo on somebody* 'betray somebody,' and *put on a dingo act* 'act in a cowardly way' (Rozumko 277). A humorous piece of advice on how to recognize Coolibah trees, common in the bush landscape, is given in "Boomerang": "I asked an old dark man how you tell the Coolibah tree, / And he told me as only a dark fella can, / That they always write it with a capital 'C'" (1962). The same ballad implies that the origin and name of billabongs – isolated and temporary areas of water left behind after a river changes its course in the bush ("Billabong") – must remain a mystery: "I asked an old dark man how the billabong got its name, / And he told me as only a dark fella can, / That he wasn't around when the billabong came" (1962). Both Coolibah tress and billabongs are important features of Australia's natural landscape – the swagman trekking the bush in "Waltzing Matilda" (1962) camps by a billabong under a Coolibah tree.

The dominant attitude of the white settlers to the Aborigines was that they were people having the knowledge of the local lore and the country's past before the European settlement, as well as unique experience of the bush (Rickard 53). Penn says that the Aborigines "had a spiritual and nurturing relationship with the Bush, seeing themselves as belonging to the landscape" (1). The ballads generally reflect this dominant attitude. The man telling his story in "Boomerang" addresses "an old dark man" or "a dark fella" (1962): he is the Aborigine who knows the lore of the land. Though the answers the Aborigine gives are humorous, *he* is the one expected to know about billabongs, Coolibah trees, kangaroos,

boomerangs, and roly-polies. Though the Aborigines were also represented as culturally inferior (Rickard 48–49), Australian English has many borrowings from their languages. They include common and proper names of places, for example *billabong*, *Towoomba*, *Yarrawonga*, *Wodonga*; objects, for example *boomerang*; animals, for example *dingo*, *wallaby*, *wallaroo* 'mountain kangaroo.'

The origins of Australia as a country are linked to penal colonies established there by the British government at the end of the 18th century. The First Fleet, which transported the first group of convicts, arrived on January 26, 1788 in Sydney Cove. Botany Bay, located close to it, was the original destination, so the ballad "Botany Bay" represents the event as it was planned rather than as it was executed (Turner 310):

> Farewell to old England forever.
> Farewell to my rum culls as well.
> Farewell to the well-known Old Bailey,
> Where I used for to cut such a swell.
> Singing Tooral liooral liaddity,
> Singing Tooral liooral liay,
> Singing Tooral liooral liaddity,
> And we're bound for Botany Bay. (1962)

The singers are the convicts transported to Australia – they bid farewell to the London prison of Old Bailey. Further lines make the character of the people even more explicit: "But because all we light-fingered gentry / Hops around with a log on our toes" (1962). Their language is a criminal jargon, or the flash or kiddy language (Fritz 22–23). Its non-standard features, here evident in the omission of verbs and pronouns, clearly set its users apart from the more educated people who arrived with them: governors, clergymen, schoolmasters, magistrates, justices, navy officers, doctors, guards, and even gentlemen convicts (Fritz 16, 24).

The economic development of Australia had many stages and took some dramatic turning points. It began with the early pastoral era; then came the gold rushes of the second part of the 19th century; the economic decline of the late 19th century brought many temporary labourers called swagmen. During the pastoral era, sheep and cattle used to be a vital part of Australia's economic landscape. The pastoral industry and its men were regarded as élites, and the idealization of shearers and drovers as pioneers was a part of Australian legend (Rickard 50–58). "Click Go the Shears" represents many aspects of work on a sheep station, especially the competition and the manner of work of the shearers:

> Out on the board the old shearer stands,
> Grasping his shears in his long, honey hands,
> Fixed is his gaze on a bare-bellied "Joe,"
> Glory if he gets her, won't he make the "ringer" go.

> Click go the shears boys, click, click, click,
> Wide is his blow and his hands move quick […]. (1962)

Further stanzas also reflect the social hierarchy of the profession: the boss of the board, the old shearer, the ringer, the tar boy, and others. Driving cattle across the country is the theme of "The Overlander Trail":

> We're on the Overlander, Overlander trail[2]
> Where only sheer determination will prevail.
> Men of Aussie with a job to do,
> So they will stick and drive the cattle through. (1962)

The quality that the men doing the job had to represent was "tough masculinity" (Wierzbicka 1992, 387) – it shaped the "men of Aussie." Such images of pastoral culture differ from the images of bucolic order and simplicity of the English countryside, shaped by the neoclassical ideals of harmony, balance, and order, which were dominant in Britain during the Augustan Age at the end of the 18th century (Humphreys 424–25; Rickard 47). It was one of the ways in which The Antipodes turned the values upside down: new geography gave rise to new ideas (Rickard 47). The gold rushes of 1851–1875 gave a new direction to the country's economy. The so-called "Yellow Fever" affected many people, but males were especially prone to its impact (Fritz 40–42). "The Whispering Bush" describes the conflicts that were a part of the experience of the men trying to get rich:

> And now they sleep there endlessly,
> And the whispering bush their secrets keep
> Where no one knows and no one sees,
> Their bleaching bones lie 'neath the trees. (1962)

They often fought and died in the wilderness that they tried to get under control and from which they wanted to profit. One should add that the gold-rushes also had impact on the language (Turner 324). Such expressions as *grog shop* 'off-license shop,' *cradle* 'net for sifting various substances,' and *to go down to bedrock* 'handle solid facts' are all motivated by the experience of searching for gold. The economic decline of the 1890s and the Great Depression of the early 1930s were two turning points for the Australian economy. The jobs became scarce and swagmen – transient labourers who travelled by foot in search of work on farms and in towns, carrying their scanty belongings in a swag or bedroll ("Swagman") – became common all over the country. A swagman stealing a jumbuck that he accidentally encounters is thus the main hero of "Waltzing Matilda" (1962) – Australia's unofficial national anthem. The ballad was composed by "Banjo" Paterson in 1895, at the time when the country was becoming more and more

independent from the British rule. A swaggie "smothered in dust and flies" is also among the thirsty crowd in "A Pub with No Beer" (1962).

As "landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture," in the early colonial period Australia was perceived as alien, hostile, alive, and disordered (Falcone 124). For the first settlers, it was "empty country – a no man's land, an absence of things, of history and of previous lives" (Falcone 124). The myth of Australian identity was built around "the idea of an untameable land" (Gibson; qtd. in Knellwolff King 110). The narrator of "Boomerang" has little experience of the Outback: "This is the tale of a new chum Jack, / Who'd just come in from the Great Outback!" (1962). A *new chum* is a newly arrived man, different from *old chums*, who were experienced Australians. The frequent use of such expressions, as well as unique hypocoristics and nicknames, for example *arvo* 'afternoon,' *barbie* 'barbecue,' and *Chrissie prezzie* 'Christmas present,' reflects the informal character of the culture (Kiesling 780). It is related to Australian "anti-intellectualism" and lack of "verbosity" (Horne 1970; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1992, 375), as well as the preference for short understatement rather than polysyllabic overstatement (Baker; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1992, 375). This attitude has sources in "the roughness of the early conditions, the need to stay alive, the comparative rarity of cultivated gentlemen" (Horne 1970; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1992, 387). Natives and experienced colonials knew the land – *new chums* still discovered it (Fritz 113–14). "The Man from the Never Never" contains another image of the Outback:

> My legs are kind of bowed from the horses that I've rode
> Through the salt bush and the sand.
> I've got that rock'n'rollin' beat from this rollin' saddle seat
> Because I live in the Never Never Land.
> I've never travelled out to all your high class towns
> Because I'm right just where I am.
> Our town's a pub and general store, what's the use of any more
> Away out in the Never Never Land. (1962)

The contrast between the Never Never Land and the towns is clearly related to the idea of the "frontier" parallel to the one in America (Ward; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1997, 102). The division between the towns and the rest of the country is also reflected in language. For example, the expression *Sydney or the bush!* is a metaphor of a 'do or die' attempt to do something (Rozumko 277). The Outback traditions may be important, but modern Australia is the most urbanised country in the world – 88% of its population lives in towns and cities (Matthews 6).

The bush has long been mythologized in Australian culture. Life in it was a defining theme of the experience of the country. The *Bulletin* magazine, which started in Sydney in 1880, published stories and poems focused "on the Australian bush as the breeding place of the true Australian type" (Fritz 53). "Little Boy Lost" provides an image of life that created such people:

> In the wild New England ranges came the word one fateful day
> To every town and village that a boy had lost its way.
> All the townsfolk quickly gathered, and the wild bush horses tossed
> As they went to search the ranges for a little boy lost. (1962)

Not only does the text describe an event that is a part of everyday life, but it also reflects the ideas of companionship, mateship, and mutual help. The concept of companionship has sources in the gradual and successful conquest of the land. The expressions *mate* 'companion' and *be matey with somebody* 'be their companion' function as a key to Australian culture (Wierzbicka 1997, 101–18, 198). They reflect the experience which entails "spending a lot of time together, doing things together, drinking together […] equality, solidarity, mutual commitment and mutual support […] companionship and fellowship in good fortune and in bad fortune" (Wierzbicka 1997, 102). The "bush ethos" was thus based on the sense of collective experience rather than individualist competition (Bell 5; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1997, 111). Similar images of the bush are common in Australian literature, for example in Henry Lawson's (1867–1922) poem "Up the Country":

> Bush! Where there is no horizon!
> Where the buried bushman sees
> Nothing – nothing! But the sameness of the ragged, stunted trees!
> Lonely hut where drought's eternal, suffocating atmosphere
> Where the God-forsaken hatter dreams of city life and beer. (qtd. in Falcone 125)

Lawson's prose pictures the bush as cruel and unfriendly, but also as an antithesis to towns: the bush is authentic; the towns are narrow-minded and full of social evil (Rickard 62). Aeneas Gunn (1870–1961), the author of *We of the Never Never* (1963; qtd. in Rickard 59), also represents the bush as mysterious, strange, and full of dangers. Patrick White's (1912–1990) novel *The Tree of Man* (1973) describes the harsh life of a farmer's family in the wilderness. Though the myth of the bush has largely disappeared with the emergence of towns and cities (Rickard 45), bushwalking is still a genuine experience of the country for visitors (Matthews 9). Finally, in spite of the collectivist "bush ethos," Australia scores as high on individualism as the United States and Great Britain (Hofstede 9). The factors that led to it may have been similar to those in Tudor and Stuart England (Trevelyan 317; MacFarlane) and colonial America: weak system of transport, long distances, lack of universal education, reliance upon oneself, as well as the economic condition of abundance of land and lack of legal rules constraining its use.

Lawson's mentioning of the beer is no accident – the drink plays an enormous role in Australian life. One of the Mambo T-shirts, popular among young surfers, depicts a demonic monster drinking beer from a can and urinating in the

middle of a sea of beer. The print reads: "Big Aussie Beer Monster Creates the Southern Ocean." The image carries one of the typical features of the constructed identity of Australia: the love for drinking (Boni 205). Drinking beer is egalitarian, masculine, and social, especially if it takes place in pubs rather than at home (Fiske et al.; qtd. in Boni 205). The ballad that best renders the importance of the beer for the Australians is "A Pub with No Beer" (1962). Like Lawson's poem, its initial lines imply a contrast between the loneliness of life in the bush and social loneliness of life without company and beer:

> It's lonesome away, from your kindred and all
> By the campfires at night, where the wild dingoes call.
> But there's nothing so lonesome, so morbid or drear
> Than to stand in a bar, of a pub with no beer. (1962)

What follows is a humorous description of the effects of the shortage of beer on people's psyche: "There's a faraway look on the face of the bum. / The maid's gone all cranky and the cook's acting queer, / What a terrible place is a pub with no beer" (1962). The theme is continued in "Answer to a Pub with No Beer" (1962), whose final lines well underscore the significance of the social ritual of 'drinking beer': "There's the old grey blitz wagon, the one with the beer, / […] / Soon the kegs were rolled in, one was placed on the bar, / It filled all the glasses, every jug and each jar. / Then the word passed around, and they all gave a cheer, / And there was laughter once more, in the pub with no beer" (1962).[3] That is why spending an evening in an Aussie pub is strongly recommended for visitors who want to have a first-hand experience of the country's culture (Matthews 9).

   "A Pub with no Beer" (1962) and "Click Go the Shears" (1962) also reflect optimism[4] as another major aspect of Australian culture (King 24; Conway; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1992, 389). A *jolly* swagman is the hero of "Waltzing Matilda" (1962). That is why the common expression *no worries* functions very much as "the national motto" (King; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1992, 388). The equally common expressions *good on you* or *good on you, mate* refer to "the attitude displayed by a certain action rather than to the action itself" (Wierzbicka 1992, 389). The difference between them and *congratulations* or *well done* in British and American culture illustrates the fact that "the Australian ethos values attitudes […] more than success" (Wierzbicka 1992, 390). Horne explains it in the following way: "There is little public glorification of success in Australia" (1964; qtd in Wierzbicka 1992, 390). The few heroes of heroic occasions (other than those of sport) are remembered for their style rather than for their achievement. The early explorers, Anzac Day; these commemorate comradeship, gameness, exertion of the Will, suffering in silence. To be game, not to whinge – that's the thing – rather than some dull success coming from organisation and thought."

   The bush ballads discussed above abound in images of Australia's cultural landscape – the fauna and the flora, the Aborigines, the convicts, the sheep and

the cattle, the Great Outback, the bush, and the beer. However, no ballad provides a more concise and comprehensive image of the country's cultural landscape than "Waltzing Matilda":

> Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong
> Under the shade of a Coolibah tree.
> He sang as he watched and waited 'till his billy boiled,
> You'll come a-Waltzing Matilda, with me. […]
> Down came a jumbuck to drink at the billabong,
> Up jumped the swagman and grabbed him with glee. (1962)

Jolly swagman, billabong, Coolibah tree, billy 'a container for cooking water,' matilda 'a kind of bed roll,' and jumbuck 'a sheep' jointly reflect the elements of the cultural heritage no less important than such iconic landmarks as the Sydney Opera House or Uluru/Ayers Rock (Boni 201).

Notes

1   See Mechtild Rössler's typology of "cultural landscapes" in "World Heritage Cultural Landscapes" (2006).
2   *Overlander* is a man that drives large herds of cattle or sheep across the land ("Overlanders"). "The Overland" is a colloquial name of the train that runs between Melbourne and Adelaide.
3   Everybody meets in a pub for a drink at the end of "Click Go the Shears": "The first pub we come to it's there we'll have a spree / And everyone that comes along it's 'Have a drink with me'" (1962).
4   Horne (1964; qtd. in Wierzbicka 1992, 389) believes that it is related to "the 'assimilation' of the significant number of the ex-convicts."

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