

A Waltz with Thomas Wood: Constructing an Australian Life¹

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*Thomas Wood, English composer, traveller and author, wrote the best-selling Australian travel book, *Cobbers in the 1930s*. His time in Australia, which included his 'discovery' of 'Waltzing Matilda', led to a complex personal and professional negotiation of national identity in which he declared himself to be 'Australian' as well as 'British'. This article briefly considers Wood's writings, experiences and attitudes in an attempt to understand how it was possible for him to make - and to believe - such an apparently unnecessary assertion.*

Keywords: Thomas Wood; national identity; biography; 'Waltzing Matilda'

In his thinly disguised World War 2 propaganda tract, *Cobbers Campaigning*, the musician, writer and traveller Thomas Wood asserted at the end of the second chapter:

although I am English by instinct, I am no longer wholly English. Nor do I wish to be. The change began ten years ago. There is no turning back. I am now part of Australia; and – for ever – Australia is part of me.

He then began the following chapter with the words: '[t]hough why, needs some explaining.'²

It certainly does. Why did 'True Thomas', as he titled his autobiography³, feel he was part of Australia? That he had an Australian as well as an English 'life'? And how was it possible for a man of such staunch and profound Englishness to expand his nationality in this way? Just as his best-known work, *Cobbers*, is a conflated construct, so his Australian life was very much a confabulation created from his one trip down under – two if we count his later wartime morale-stiffener – and his portentous encounter with

what has become, largely through his intervention, Australia's unofficial national anthem.⁴

Thomas Wood (1892 - 1950) was born in Chorley, Lancashire and mostly raised in Barrow-in-Furness within a family descended from 'a line of Derbyshire squires, hard-bitten men'.⁵ His father was a seaman who by the time Thomas was old enough to know was master of a coastal trader. From the age of nine to sixteen Thomas went to sea in the summer seasons, developing an ability to communicate with working men and a lifelong love of the sea and ships. This was one reason for his later love affair with Australia.

Although a bright lad, he suffered from poor eyesight all his life, an affliction that made his chosen work of writing and transcribing musical scores excruciating. Like the solid chap he was though, Thomas rarely complained and became an accomplished composer and arranger. He went to Oxford in 1914 where his upper working-class/lower middle-class origins became veneered with the prevailing orthodoxies of Empire and manhood.⁶ This combination of the demotic and the educated enabled him to move easily in social milieux as different as Perth's exclusive Weld Club and Queensland's South Gregory pub – which was where he would come across 'Waltzing Matilda'.

He fell in love with Oxford, a passion that lasted all his life - and after.⁷ The main, though not the only, collection of his papers and musical manuscripts is in Exeter College. He went to work for the Admiralty in 1917, then studied composition at the Royal College of Music in 1918. He gained a Doctor of Music at Oxford and got the coveted post of Music Director at Tonbridge School in 1920. While there he wrote a text on the virtues of school music, *Music and Boyhood*.⁸

He returned to Oxford as a lecturer in 1924 and that year married St Osyth Mahala Eustace-Smith. He left Oxford in 1928 to compose and undertake music examining, a role that brought him to Australia. He also published a revised *Oxford Song Book* in that year.⁹ As an examiner for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music Wood travelled to Australia in 1930 and throughout and around the continent. Always an observant man, he kept a diary from which, together with letters home, he eventually wrote *Cobbers*, published to great acclaim and commercial success by Oxford University Press in 1934.¹⁰ 'Cobber', of course, is an Australianism meaning a male friend – current

in the 1920s and 30s, though now largely archaic. Wood used the word as a focus for his belief in the strong ties between Britain and Australia.

The book was an immediate bestseller in Australia and England, going into many editions throughout the 1930s. Its breezy, no-nonsense style, combined with Wood's ability to operate in a variety of social circles made it a very readable account, then and now. Its author's implicit and explicit Empire sensibilities resonated with many readers of the period, both in Britain and Australia.

Wood was a man of varied abilities and wide interests, one of which was folksong. He had collected folksong and related folklore in Essex and Suffolk, a selection of which he published in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society*.¹¹ He also collected traditional music from countries visited on his voyage to and from Australia. As he travelled around that country he was alert, even pre-programmed, to the presence of such songs.

But in *Cobbers*, Wood reports that, despite his interest in searching for folksongs in Australia he was unable to discover any.¹² It was not until he reached Winton (Queensland) that he came across a song that had 'the right smack', as he put it. The song was 'Waltzing Matilda', composed in the Winton area by A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson (lyrics) and set to traditional music adapted by Christina Macpherson in 1895.¹³

Wood gave a number of different accounts of this event that, to some extent, differ.¹⁴ He made at least two visits to Winton, which he combined into one event for his book.¹⁵ Whenever the meeting or meetings with the publican of the South Gregory pub, Mr Shanahan, took place, Wood came away from it with a set of lyrics and a melody. In this act, Wood achieved a goal he had set himself before reaching Australia – something he does not mention in *Cobbers*. In his diary he recounts how he heard a young man, Rowland Morris, sing 'Waltzing Matilda' aboard the ship coming to Australia and that he considered it to be the closest thing he had heard to an Australian traditional song, then writing: 'I hope to find some in Queensland, though.'¹⁶

And when he did, he harmonised a version of the words and music he received from Mr Shanahan and sent the arrangement to his music publishers in England, Stainer & Bell.¹⁷ This straightforward choral arrangement has become the most familiar version

of the ‘unofficial Australian national anthem’ and seems to have earned Wood a substantial income during the remainder of his life, and subsequently for his estate.¹⁸

As well as sending his arrangement into the music-publishing world, Wood also included it in *Cobbers*. In 1936 this publication of the song came to the attention of the copyright owners, Allans Music and a legal dispute arose with OUP. (Paterson was a solicitor, though he had long before sold his copyright in the lyric ‘for a fiver’).¹⁹

OUP registered Wood’s arrangement in North America on August 27, 1936. Allans registered their version with Marie Cowan as arranger on 23 December 1936²⁰. In January the following year OUP registered another two Thomas Wood arrangements in America. The dispute was eventually settled in 1941 by OUP surrendering copyright to Allans, though OUP reportedly paid a large sum to Allans for their and Wood’s infringement.²¹ Wood’s setting of the song was subsequently recorded in 1938 to great acclaim and popularity by the famous Australian bass baritone Peter Dawson (1882-1961), going on to become the internationally known version of the song.²² It is now said to be the most recorded Australian song and to be among the top twenty most recorded songs of all time.²³

So what was the nature of Thomas Wood’s Australian ‘life’?

It was fabricated from one visit of less than two years in 1930-32. During this sojourn he travelled to every state though not, it seems, to the Northern Territory. Although Wood only visited Western Australia briefly *en voyage*, he subsequently spent a good deal of time there, or at least found the most to write about that state, which forms by far the largest portion of *Cobbers* – eight of nineteen chapters. He also went back to sea for some sightseeing off the West Australian and Queensland coasts.

Wherever he went, meeting with high, low and in-between, his bright, breezy and no-nonsense style stood him in good stead. The southwest timber workers of Western Australia and the pastoralists of Winton all called him ‘Doc’. By his own account, which seems about right, they took the pommy new chum as they found him and were pleased to keep his company. He was probably considered ‘a decent sort of bloke’ who enjoyed a beer and was more than good for a sing-song in an era when such entertainment was still viable.²⁴

In *Cobbers* he discoursed on Australian humour with printable examples of yarns. He listened avidly to the vernacular, proclaiming it a habit rather than an art, as it was restricted to 'the Big Five' terms, as he called the most popular swearwords. Like most English visitors Wood had trouble with the flattened vowels of Australian folk speech²⁵ but was relieved to find that Standard English could still be heard:

farmers in Tasmania and lumpers in Queensland and pearlers in Thursday Island talk like this. Some of them were men who had never been out of Australia. Their vowels were clean, exact; their diction was as clean as the diction which senior members of a university are expected to produce, and sometimes do.²⁶

Wood was impressed by the Australian sense of economic egalitarianism, saying that except for doctors, barristers and other professionals 'social status is largely a question of bank balance.'²⁷ He noted a freer and more open spirit in the bush, even in those well-heeled areas where social relations 'were straight from eighteenth-century patriarchal England'.²⁸

He observed a dramatic difference between the friendly generosity of private life and the bitterness of public interaction and politics in general. This was probably related to the economic depression beginning to take hold, something to which Wood seems to have missed during his extensive travels. He acknowledges this harsh reality only in a footnote in later editions of *Cobbers*, qualifying what he had written in the first edition based on comments received from readers.

He found the Australians nationalistic, but with Britain coming a close second in their affections 'they are as pro-British as they are Australian'.²⁹ This was important for Wood, whose view of the world was conditioned by the Empire sensibilities of the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It would later play a fundamental role in his wartime propaganda activities for the Ministry of Information and impel his second trip to Australia in 1944 and a rekindling of his acquaintance with Western Australian journalist and author, Malcolm Uren, also engaged in war work. Their shared concern was for the preservation of 'Britishness' among the Australian population.³⁰

Following the typically clear-eyed and straightforward pronouncements quoted above, Wood ended his discussion of Australian culture with a resounding economic endorsement: ‘When I got home I invested two years’ savings in Australian stocks, and I advised my friends to do the same.’ He thought that ‘this ought to be proof that apart from liking my Australia, I believe in its future’.³¹

Wood obviously enjoyed his Australian experience and, generally, related well to the Australian way of life, its values, attitudes and robustness. But this is still a long way from the statement he makes in the second chapter of *Cobbers Campaigning*. How could a man of such profound Englishness proclaim that he had an Australian life?

Thomas Wood was able to construct and continue his Australian ‘life’ because he saw the place as refreshingly different to the England he knew. But it was a difference that appealed to his stout, Hobbit-like sense of democracy. At the same time, he believed that his Australia was enough like England and, most importantly, deeply loyal to it and the Empire, to engage and exhilarate what we might now regard as his ‘little England’ sensibilities. Australia was, in effect, an antipodean mirror through which he was able to regard himself, his place of birth and his spiritual and emotional home. This was not so unlike how many Australians felt at that time, many who bought and presumably read *Cobbers* as a confirmation of the still strong ‘crimson thread of kinship’ with Britain and its Empire.

This is the main reason why Dr Thomas Wood of Barrow, Oxford, Tonbridge School and the Old Parsonage at Bures felt able, perhaps obliged, to say ‘I am now part of Australia; and – for ever – Australia is part of me.’ Although this was written in the midst of his propagandist need to shore up ‘Britishness’ in Australia, his Australian life was effectively another dimension of his Englishness. This is an attitude still met with among British people with Australian connections and/or experience. Wood really was a ‘cobber’ – or at least he thought he was.

So much for his life. At his death in 1950 Wood was headlined in England as the ‘composer of Aussie national anthem’, a doubly inaccurate statement that nevertheless reveals how he was viewed in a country where Australia was then considered just another extension of the Empire. Wood’s self-conferred dual identity was also a reflection of the

attitudes of many Australians of the period. They thought of themselves as both Australian and, if at a remove of a generation or two, also as British.

In Wood's era it was probably inconceivable to separate biography from nationality, and he would not have wished to perform such surgery. But his self-proclaimed bi-nationality does imply the possibility of a meta- or supra-national relationship with another country. And, from Wood's account, a passionate one. Of course, that country would need to be predominantly 'British'. It is inconceivable that Wood would have had similar affections for Ceylon or France. The pivotal device for achieving such a duality must have been the Empire³². Australia was the same pink colour as all those other outposts on the map, with the advantage of a dominant Anglo Celtic culture and language.

A related dimension of this biographical state involves the British - or perhaps just English - attitude that takes Australia for granted as a kind of antipodean version of the homeland rather than as an entity in its own right. It is a form of unconsciously assumed ownership conferred more from generations of immigration than any serious sense of sovereignty or hegemony. In this view Australians, at least those of Anglo Celtic background, are simply just like the British but with more swearing and - as Wood noted in one of his diary entries, though not in *Cobbers* - poor manners.³³

NOTES

¹ This paper derives from a larger project on the life and work of Thomas Wood being undertaken by a consortium of Australian and English institutions, including the Bodleian Library, the English Folk Dance and Song Society, the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition at Sheffield University, the National Library of Australia, the National Film and Sound Archive and the Centre for Advanced Studies in Australia, Asia and the Pacific, Curtin University. My particular thanks for archival interventions and assistance to Michael Heaney, Bodleian Library, John Maddicott of Exeter College and Tim Dolin, Curtin University.

² T. Wood, *Cobbers Campaigning* (Sydney and London, 1940), pp.26-7. Royalties and profits from this book were donated to the Australian Red Cross, according to the jacket.

³ T. Wood, *True Thomas* (London, 1936).

⁴ T. Wood, *Cobbers* (London, 1934).

⁵ Details of Wood's life, mainly his musical career, can be found in N. Coghill, 'Thomas Wood: 1892-1950', *Music and Letters*, Vol. xxxii (1951), pp.128-130; J. Edmondson, 'Thomas Wood: A Man for All Seasons' at Old Barrovian website, accessed January 2002 (schoolmate's memoir); M. Hurd, 'Wood, Thomas' in Sadie, S (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 27, 2nd edition, (London, 2001). A slightly broader picture emerges in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography Online* at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120624b.htm>, originally published 1990 and written by Russel Ward, accessed February 2007.

⁶ Though when Wood failed to concur with the fashionable leftish agenda of his middle-class intellectual fellow students at Oxford, they labelled him a Tory. See Wood, *True Thomas*, p.133.

⁷ Wood bequeathed his estate to Exeter College. See Wood to Rector of Exeter College October 3, 1938, marked 'private and personal'. Copy of original in Exeter College archives. His estate was worth £118, 868 at probate.

⁸ T. Wood, *Music and Boyhood: some suggestions on the possibilities of music in public, preparatory and other schools*, (Oxford, 1925).

⁹ T. Wood (collected and arranged), *The Oxford Song Book, Volume II* (London, 1928).

¹⁰ Now held in the Batty Library, Perth.

¹¹ Thomas Wood, 'Folksongs from the Essex-Suffolk Border', *Journal of the Folk Song Society* Vol. 33 (1929), pp.125-135. This publication of the English Folk Dance and Song Society is now titled *Folk Music Journal*. See also Wood's discussion of his folksong interests in *True Thomas* in the chapter titled 'Music'.

¹² The issues involved in this odd oversight are numerous see Graham Seal, 'A.L. Lloyd in Australia: Some Conclusions', *Folk Music Journal*, Vol. 9 (2006), pp.56-71.

¹³ 'Waltzing Matilda', in particular its music (there are several melodies), has a complex and sometimes controversial history and mythology. See 'Waltzing Matilda' in G. Davey and Graham Seal (eds), *The*

Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore (Oxford, 1993) and the National Library of Australia's digital production at <http://www.nla.gov.au/epubs/waltzingmatilda/>

¹⁴ See Thomas Wood, 'Waltzing Matilda' in *The Listener*, 30 March 1938, p.692, which makes the untrue claim 'that I met for the first time the two words 'Waltzing Matilda' ...' at Winton, Queensland.

¹⁵ Wood papers, entry for 13 August 1930, 736A/2, Battye Library, Western Australia.

¹⁶ Wood papers, 736A/2, Battye Library, p.67. It is unclear what the exact date of this encounter might have been.

¹⁷ It is not clear from Wood's account in *Cobbers* whether he arranged the version he had from the Winton publican, or one from another source. His diary of the trip does not mention getting the song from Shanahan, though as Wood conflated his various Australian perambulations into a single narrative in *Cobbers* he presumably returned to Winton on one of his subsequent trips. This remains to be confirmed through further research.

¹⁸ According to an item in the Sydney *Mirror* of 10 Feb 1971, Wood's widow left a personal estate of £799,000, derived, it was strongly implied, from the success of Wood's arrangement of 'Waltzing Matilda'.

¹⁹ Though Richard Magoffin makes a good case that they were not really the copyright holders, see his *Waltzing Matilda: the Story Behind the Legend*, (Sydney, 1987).

²⁰ The Cowan version had been produced in 1902 as part of an advertising campaign for 'Billy Tea'. The words of the original lyric were changed to ensure the term 'billy' appeared more frequently than it had in the original. It seems that this was the moment at which Paterson's plain 'Swagman' became 'jolly'.

²¹ Details from Magoffin, *Waltzing Matilda*, pp.103-104. These arrangements would seem to relate only to the copyright in the British and Australian markets. America was a different copyright and publishing territory in which 'Waltzing Matilda' has another complex legal dimension unrelated to the focus of the present paper.

²² 'Waltzing Matilda' had been recorded a number of times before, though not in the Wood arrangement, by Queensland tenor John Collinson in 1927, by Colin Crane in 1930 and by the British Hill Billies in 1937, see R. Smith and P. Burgis, *Peter Dawson, The World's Most Popular Baritone*, (Strawberry Hills, New South Wales, 2001), pp.155–156. Dawson also made a recording of it in 1935, though this was not released in the United States like the 1938 version which was the pivotal recording, see National Film and Sound Archive catalogue for details.

²³ National Library of Australia "Waltzing Matilda" webpages <http://www.nla.gov.au/epubs/waltzingmatilda/>, accessed December 2006.

²⁴ See the section on this in Wood, *True Thomas*, pp.235ff.

²⁵ See Graham Seal, *The Lingo: Listening to Australian English*, (Sydney, 1999).

²⁶ Wood, *Cobbers* (1938 edn), p. 202.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.205

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.205

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.209

³⁰ See *Cobbers Campaigning* and Uren Papers, Battye. During his first visit to Australia, Wood conceived a concern about the predominance of American editions of music and the absence of British editions. On Sunday June 29, 1930 while in Brisbane he wrote 'I intend to go round the music shops & see if I cannot do something to get English music known here. They make me angry by using American editions of the classics, & by their refusal to stock British modern music.' (Wood papers, 736A/2, Battye Library Western Australia p. 97).

³¹ Wood, *Cobbers*, p.211. His note to this statement says he 'saw NSW under the worst administration it had ever had', a reference to the socialistic Lang government's time in office, a view that also comes through strongly in his diary.

³² Wood also undertook an extensive visit to Canada, detailed in Wood, *True Thomas* and *Cobbers Campaigning*.

³³ Wood papers, 736A/2, Battye Library Western Australia.