

“Click, click go the shears”: Text and Orality in an Australian Textual Community

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Lukutaidottomuuden ja luku- sekä kirjoitustaidon välistä rajaa on aina ollut vaikea piirtää tarkasti, varsinkin esimodernilla aikakaudella. Ongin ”Primary orality” (”ensisijainen suullisuus”) -mallia (1962) on kyseenalaistettu toistuvasti. Atkinsonin (2014) tutkimus väittää, että ainakaan kansan- ja ammattilaulujen tutkimuksessa Ongin väite, että kansanlaulut siirtyisivät improvisaation yhteydessä (that it was central to the transmission of traditional songs that they should be passed on orally through improvisation) ei välttämättä pidä paikkaansa tai ainakaan selitä variaatioita. Tapaustutkimukseni tukee Atkinsonin ehdotusta, jonka mukaan käytännössä sekä laulujen painetut että käsinkirjoitetut versiot ovat selvästi vaikuttaneet toisiinsa. Tutkin Atkinsonin ehdotuksen paikkansapitävyyttä eräässä kiertävässä miesten ammattiryhmässä 1800-luvun Australiassa. Kyseinen lampaidenkeritsijöiden ryhmä muodosti ”tekstuaalisen yhteisön” (”textual community”, Stock 1990), jolla oli ammattinsa perusteella samankaltainen käsitys lauluista, joiden sanat kuvailivat työolosuhteiden yksityiskohtia. Tutkimuksen lopputulos osoittaa, että vaikka ”alkuperäisestä versiosta” oli lähes aina olemassa painettu teksti, muunnelmia syntyi esitettyjen ja painettujen versioiden dynaamisessa ja dialogisessa kohtaamisessa.

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1 Introduction: Primary Orality

Is a song a text? Is it orally recreated at each performance or tied to a printed source? Before recording equipment was invented and came to be used by collectors of traditional songs at the end of the 19th century, only transcriptions, in print or manuscript, existed of even the most popular songs such as the “Marseillaise” and “John Brown’s Body.” From the 1930s many ballad scholars from the Balkans (Lord 1960) to the north of Scotland (Buchan 1972) maintained what Walter J. Ong (1982: 94) called “primary orality,” that it was central to the transmission of traditional songs that they should be passed on orally through incremental repetition and formulaic improvisation. This meant that songs were re-invented with every performance. In being metrical and interactive they possessed a deeper social coherence than the mere surface cohesion of a written text (Hawthorn 1992). Finally, in performance a song was unique and bound to an individual. Privileging the oral in this way was challenged first by poststructuralists (Derrida 1976), but Derrida’s position on this has to some extent been undermined by the rise of the internet, which has finally broken the link between text and a physical medium such as a document.

Recently David Atkinson and others (such as Roud 2014: 1–17) have denied widespread primary orality even in the medieval period. Atkinson (2014: 51) challenges the

assumption that traditional songs originated from a purely (or even primarily) oral tradition. He maintains that up to ninety per cent of the English and Scottish ballads and folk songs collected from the Romantic period and in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century could also be found in cheap print. Despite the strong evidence of crosses instead of signatures on legal documents right up to the late nineteenth century (giving evidence that precisely those groups which were most actively performing traditional songs were unable even to sign their own names), Atkinson maintains that England and Scotland were effectively literate societies from the late middle ages onwards. This sits uncomfortably with his admission that less than half the male population could sign their names until the nineteenth century, and far fewer women. As might be expected, women were among the most significant transmitters of these songs during the first folk music revival between 1880 and 1930 (Atkinson 2014: 54). Atkinson maintains that the dichotomy of literacy and illiteracy “may be little more than a nineteenth-century (or maybe eighteenth-century) ideological construct, tied to a modern construction of interiority, personality and subjectivity” (Atkinson 2014: 55, 54). He therefore calls for a theoretical model which will integrate both the printed and the oral. Atkinson’s position is strengthened by recent work on printed literature, in particular drama, where texts from Shakespeare (*King Lear*) to W. B. Yeats vary as much as songs which have been transmitted orally (Foakes 2003 [1997]: 110–46).

This paper develops Atkinson’s thesis of the oral text in the context of the songs of a heterogeneous group in Australia who formed what Brian Stock called a “textual community,” a group “organised round the common understanding of a script [sic]” (1996 [1990]: 23) by virtue of their occupation, shearing sheep. A further factor is that shearers, who were often nomadic and worked under unhealthy conditions, became representative of Australian independence and masculinity, and many songs were composed about them by those who were remote from either the conditions or the locations of the shearers themselves (Anderson 1991; *Bush* 1989).

2 The Shearers: Non-urban, White, Male – and Radical

Shearers formed the dominant male occupation group in the nineteenth century. During the period of the earliest songs, the 1850s, there were six million sheep in Australia, far greater than the adult population of Australia. Shearers satisfy most of the traditional criteria of a subculture. As many of their narratives show, they were white and male, like the punks and the bike boys analysed in early studies of subcultures (Hebdige 1984 [1979]). They were verbal and articulate, but because their access to education was minimal, they were portrayed in songs and recitations (a popular vernacular mode in Australia) as having a retro-view of women, as in “When the Ladies Come to the Shearing shed,” a poem for reciting aloud:

[Women] gush and say in a girly way
That “the dear little lambs” are sweet. (*Bush* 1989: 116)

Social and gender attitudes cannot simply be “read off” from popular texts, and this poem was not written by an insider but by a poet called Henry Lawson (1867–1922), who was later to become a national icon. However, as will be shown in the case of Chinese fellow workers, shearers were, in addition to their bluff masculinism, also known for not being especially tolerant of other nationalities: Aborigines were stigmatised, the English (‘poms’) were mocked, and Irish workers were favoured.

Thus, despite being seasonal workers scattered across a huge subcontinent, the shearers formed a distinctive subculture, with their own *argot* (group language variety), their own territory (the shearing shed), conflict with authority – and a clear singing tradition. They were almost without exception white, of European origin, male and of course non-urban, although visits to the city formed an essential part of their recreational life. In addition, they were politically radical: they became the backbone of the Australian Labour Party, and organised a series of strikes for better conditions from the 1890s to the 1950s. Most of these were supported by vigorous protest songs which were composed, printed and distributed for the purpose. Indeed, Dennis O’Keeffe (2011: 219) maintains that “in fact, without a series of volatile and turbulent events occurring during [the 1894 shearers’ strike], ‘Waltzing Matilda’ [Australia’s most famous song] would never have been written.” However, the preference of collectors for songs that had been supposedly untainted by print is one of the reasons why many of the strike songs themselves have been lost, because the song sheets were rarely preserved (Meredith 1983: 48). This paper attempts to show how, despite the lack of primary contemporary printed material, the evidence points to a dialogic exchange between the singers and popular print culture, much of which originated from cities far distant from the shearing sheds.

3 Oral Memory and Occupational Context

Walter Ong wrote that “the oral memory works well with ‘heavy’ characters, persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public” (1982: 70). This fits the shearers in the most productive years of the wool industry, the second half of the nineteenth century. They had an elite status which can be broadly compared with that of the Finnish log-roller (*tukkimies/timmerkarl*) in the same period. The nature of the job in the woolsheds led to the shearers’ physique approximating to the heroic type in the songs of the time: they were portrayed as muscular, rootless and attractive, like “Flash Jack from Gundagai”:

I’ve pinked ‘em with the Wolseleys and I’ve rushed with B-bows too,
And shaved ‘em in the grease, my boys, with the grass seed showing through.
But I never slumped my pen, my lads, whate’er it may contain,
While shearin’ for old Tom Patterson on the One-Tree Plain.

Chorus All among the wool, boys, all among the wool,
Keep your wide blades full, boys,
I can do a respectable tally myself when I like to try,
But they know me round the backblocks as Flash Jack from Gundagai. ¹ (*Bush* 1989: 104)

This song assumes so much in terms of occupational terms used in the shearing process (“pinking”, “B-bows”), placenames (“the One-Tree Plain”) and references to individuals in the gang (“Tom Patterson”) that it can clearly be regarded as an “insider” song which would be adapted to new conditions if it were sung anywhere else. Occupational songs such as those of the shearers assume familiarity not only with the technical terms for the various processes, but also the dialect and shared catch-phrases. The chorus of “The Backblock Shearer,” sung by Jack “Hoopiron” Lee of New South Wales, features all of these:

Hurrah, my boys, my shears are set, I feel both fit and well;
Tomorrow you’ll find me at my pen when the gaffer rings the bell.
With Haydn’s patent thumb guards fixed and both my blades pulled back,
Tomorrow I go with my sardine blow for a century or the sack.² (*Meredith and Anderson*, 1967: 38)

Athletic figures like Flash Jack and “The Backblock Shearer” were often celebrated in song, underpinned less by the Romantic image of the heroic individual than by models already available to the singer. For example, shearing in a hot climate is hard work, and there are many heroic songs about the numbers shorn (the Australian variant of *sheared*) in a day: the record for hand-shearing was 327 ewes in seven hours in 1892 (*Fahey* 2009: 8). As a result of the prestige enjoyed by the shearers, their songs outnumbered those of any occupational group but the gold miners, and together they for many years presented a stereotype of the Australian male in the outback.

4 Shearers and Orality

In the late nineteenth century a thriving popular press developed which printed song texts, some of them relating to the shearers, and also recitations, long poems which were occasionally sung but more often recited. The spread of these oral performance items increased when Australia’s two outstanding poets, Henry Lawson and Andrew Barton (“Banjo”) Paterson (1864–1941), the probable author of “Waltzing Matilda,” started publishing in the late 1880s.

¹ *Pink*: to shear the sheep so close that the skin shows through.

Wolseley: machine shears *B-bows*: hand shears

² *Haydn’s patent thumb guards*: giving protection against the blades of the shears.

The shearers were not illiterate. By the outbreak of the First World War there was almost 100% literacy in the English-speaking world (Atkinson 2014: 54). Only nomadic groups such as the Roma and the Travellers in Britain and Ireland are known to have had many members who could not read or write (MacColl and Seeger 1977: 5). Similarly, the Australian shearers were more dependent on the textual community than on texts as such. Paraphrasing Stock, Atkinson argues that songs “were not always written down, but they were *understood as if they were*,” a phrase he repeats three times (2014: 56, 60, 67. my italics), concluding that “the ballad text [...] has an autonomy of its own – not an essentialist, New Critical, signification of its own, but an imaginary, abstract existence, separate from any intended meaning that might accompany its production (singing/recitation/printing) or its reception (listening/reading)” (Atkinson 2014: 60).

In this paper I have applied to the Australian shearers Atkinson’s radical suggestion of the relative autonomy of songs in performance even in conditions where cheap printed sources are known to have existed. I have identified twelve songs that can with strong evidence be traced back to the period in the late nineteenth century (c. 1850–1914) when printed sources were available but not plentiful. Some conclusions can be drawn about which songs were being sung at that time. Only two pieces by the writers mentioned above, Lawson’s “Shearer’s Dream” and Paterson’s “Murrumbidgee Shearer” and “Bushman’s Song” are known to have been taken up by the shearers. The rest can be identified with some confidence on internal evidence. For example, songs featuring Chinese cooks or Chinese ‘scabs’ (strikebreakers) certainly date from the nineteenth century because the so-called White Australia policy adopted when the Federation was established in 1901 virtually excluded them from jobs in the shearing gangs. Despite the rhetoric of the “Utopia of working men” (sic) which was building the new Dominion, they were not made welcome in Australia.

Despite the limited availability of written sources, the various versions of the songs that are known to have been sung at this time all show the variability which the UNESCO special committee on Folklore maintained would be a feature of songs performed in a context of primary orality (Honko 1987: 8). Bernard Cerquiglini (1999: 84–85) has proposed a model for such dispersed textual authority, such as instances where traditional songs often move freely between print, recordings, the internet and live performance. This is made clear in a comprehensive study by Keith McKenry (2011: 186–215) of what is perhaps Australia’s most iconic song after “Waltzing Matilda,” the shearing song “Click Go the Shears.” It can be traced back only to a named composer in the 1940s and a single performance by the American singer Burl Ives during a tour of Australia in 1952, and has been rewritten and developed by numerous singers since then. However, it has many of the features mentioned above – circumstantial detail about the division of labour, dialect words, technical terms, and a reported instance from the 1920s (McKenry 2011: 204) – and such is the nature of the oral tradition that it cannot by any means be ruled out that it was first sung in the nineteenth century. An

explanation of the late date might well be that many songs from that period first surfaced from the 1950s onwards, when collectors like Meredith and Anderson (1967) started recording singers, mostly by then very old, on a systematic basis. In terms of Atkinson’s revisionist model, “Click Go the Shears” can be said to show precisely the dialogic relation between print, orality and the (nascent) recording history offered by collectors, radio and public performance that calls Ong’s model of primary orality into question.

My final example further confirms Atkinson’s questioning of the case for primary orality. There is considerable evidence that from earliest times in colonial Australia the communication of ballads was not a passive activity but involved active participation, and therefore variation, on both sides of the oral/written divide. In 1892, “Banjo” Pater-son published a song about shearing called “A Bushman’s Song”:

I’m travelling down the Castlereagh, and I’m a station-hand,
I’m handy with the ropin’ pole, I’m handy with the brand,
And I can ride a rowdy colt, or swing the axe all day,
But there’s no demand for a station-hand along the Castlereagh. (*Bush* 1989: 175)

It seems to have been based on an earlier song (Meredith 1983: 93; note the internal rhyme in the fourth line “demand [...] hand” which suggests an Irish origin), but Pater-son was writing when strikes were taking place in shearing sheds all over eastern Aus-tralia, and he added several verses of his own:

I asked a cove for shearin’ once along the Marthaguy:
“We shear non-union here,” says he. “I call it scab,” says I.
I looked along the shearin’ floor before I turned to go –
There were eight or ten dashed Chinamen a-shearin’ in a row.
It was shift, boys, shift, for there wasn’t the slightest doubt
It was time to make a shift with the leprosy about.
So I saddled up my horses, and I whistled to my dog,
And I left his scabby station at the old jig-jog. (*Bush* 1989: 175)

As in the goldfields, Chinese immigrants are evidently criticised here because they were seen as strikebreakers, but also because of the code of exclusion practised by elite occu-pation groups: Chinese were typically employed as cooks, a much lower-paid job. However, by 1892, when “A Bushman’s Song” was published, shearers’ songs had en-tered a period of almost universal literacy and were disseminated by a popular press which printed song lyrics and recitations. Significantly, there were no presses printing sheet ballads of the kind that were enormously popular in nineteenth century Europe. Australia was closer to the situation in Europe at the Reformation, when many new translations of the Bible were prepared for oral transmission, and printed in very few, expensive copies. (Bassnett 2014: 92)

In the 1920s the shearers' songs became available on commercial and personal recordings and today, of course, on the internet. This shearer's song became popular at once and has since been recorded and reprinted numerous times. I have so far traced nine later versions of this popular song, six of which are recordings and five printed versions. No two versions reproduce the stanza exactly as Paterson published it: for example, the number of Chinese strikebreakers varies from 8 to 24. Rather than having circulated purely in song form, variation in "A Bushman's Song" has taken place in a dynamic and dialogic exchange between written, recorded and printed sources.

5 The Written Tradition and its Music

Although Australia has a tradition of recitations, spoken narratives in verse, dating from the earliest period of convict settlement, this study has focussed on sung examples, often accompanied by an accordion or, as Irish workers in Australia often dominated the workforce, a flute. I suggest that study of the music as integral to the meaning is central to discussions of primary orality. Bertrand Bronson emphasized that to ignore the music when discussing songs was to erase their status as songs:

Question: When is a ballad not a ballad?

Answer: When it has no tune. (Bronson 1969: 61)

Challenging D.K. Wilgus's famous assertion that "the text is the thing", Bronson argued strongly that, far from being a casual accompaniment to a text, tunes "shape the verbal poetics" (quoted in Porter 2009: 85). He quotes John Dowland: "The Dorian Moode is the bestower of wisdom, and causer of chastity. The Phrygian causeth wars, and enflameth fury. The Eolian doth appease the tempests of the minde, and when it hath appeased them lulls them asleepe. The Lydian doth sharpen the wit of the dull, & doth make them that are burdened with earthly desires, to desire heavenly things [...] Every habit of the mind is governed by songs." Like the story, the tune is learned as an idea, rather than a fixed series of sounds. Bronson's emphasis on the significance of the interrelation of melodies, as opposed to texts, has not always been either recognized or accepted in oral studies. Christopher Marsh writes of the prevailing ideas that were still current in the 1980s: "Ballad tunes, we have been told [by Natascha Würzbach and Richard Lockett], were largely irrelevant because they bore 'no definite functional interrelation' with the all-important texts. Melody, it has been said, was 'merely a vehicle' for the words" (Marsh 2013 [2010]: 288). Hugh Shields (1993: 113) asserted as late as 1993 that, in Ireland, "for the traditional singer it is the words which are the 'song'; the 'air' is somehow accessory," while admitting, "Yet the air can outlive the words, or can recall them." The following years saw what might be termed a "melodic turn" in oral studies where scholars on the left took account of criticism by such writers as Chris Bearman that they had used folksongs "as historical evidence by concentrating exclusively on song texts and ignoring the musical aspect" (Porter 2009: 102).

In his important new model of interlocking elements of oral, print and media culture, Atkinson marginalises the idea that music shapes the meaning, particularly through the zeitgeist of one song ‘bleeding’ into another by means of the melody. Thus “A Bushman’s Song” was sung to a Scottish tune called “The Suir Milk Cart”, and this certainly contributed to its popularity. In the same way the melody of “The Backblock Shearer”, quoted earlier, is that of a familiar Irish ballad, “Castle Garden”. Shearers’ songs drew on a range of familiar melodies which were used for song after song. A new melody was evidently learnt from the singer, as until Hugh Anderson’s *Colonial Ballads* (1955), they were never included in those rare cases in Australia where song lyrics were printed. Nevertheless, this group made frequent use of familiar songs. For example, anyone listening to a song about a shearer who had failed to become accepted by the group would know the attitude to take not only from the words but from the choice of tune.

The centrality of melody in this discussion cannot be overemphasised. The leading Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko (1997: 16) felt able to state confidently, “Music does not add meaning: it *is* meaning.” The reason why songs ridiculing an overseer or an outsider exist in song, and why they were associated with certain melodies, is made clear by Claude Lévi-Strauss: “Singing is the acoustic equivalent of wearing a mask: people can convey a message without bearing full responsibility” (1969: 94).

6 Conclusion

Thirteen years after “A Bushman’s Song,” “Banjo” Paterson complained that the shearing songs had “pretty well died out” (Fahey 2009: 12). Fortunately this was not true: they continued to be collected until recent times, many in fuller versions. A study of the large corpus of songs known to have been sung by shearers reveals considerable numbers of variants existing between surviving records of their songs – not, unfortunately, recordings in the case of early performances. Since singing can be likened to a politics of gesture, symbol, and metaphor, this is exactly what both Walter Ong and the UNESCO Special Committee maintained would be a feature of songs performed in a context of primary orality. However, what is curious is that songs which were performed during the period when texts of popular songs were widely available in print, and later in recordings, demonstrate the same variability. This paper has shown that, even though a coherent and manageable corpus of shearers songs is represented today almost exclusively by published texts, the variability of those texts, and the diversity of the ballads sung by shearers about their lives in Australia, roughly in the period from 1830 to 1930, support Atkinson’s hypothesis of the continuing interchange of printed texts and the songs recorded later (often much later) by the early collectors.

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