

## Billycan in my hand. Australian folk songs about food.

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The unofficial Australian national song, 'Waltzing Matilda' is about a swagman (an itinerant) stealing a sheep that has come to drink from the billabong at which the swaggie has set up camp for the night. From out of nowhere comes a squatter (the owner of the sheep) and three policemen who attempt to take the swaggie into custody. 'You'll never take me alive' the swaggie says and jumps into the billabong and drowns.

Swaggies and their food is a theme in many Australian folk songs as are alcohol, damper (an unleavened bread) alcohol, and tea.

So, pull up a log or your Matilda (a swag, the roll or bundle of possessions carried by an itinerant worker or swagman<sup>1</sup>) stoke up the fire, put the billy on for tea and let's have a yarn about food in Australian folk songs.<sup>2</sup>

### The Billy

The billy is a constant in the songs, as it should be given both its ubiquity and its functionality. Picture a round tin container with a lid and a thin handle that arcs over the top and that's the sole cooking utensil a swaggie needs.

*With my swag upon on my shoulder  
And billycan in my hand  
I'll travel the bush of Australia  
Along with my Irishman  
Moriarty*

It's an essential part of socialising ...

*So, pass the billy round boys don't let the pint pot<sup>3</sup> stand there  
For tonight we'll drink the health of every overlander  
The Overlander*

... and wakes.

*There's tea in the battered billy  
Place pannikins out in a row  
We'll drink to the merry next meeting  
In the land where all good fellows go  
The Dying Stockman*

It's multifunctional.

*Now the billy I make my tea in it does me for a stew  
The dish I wash my face in I make my damper too  
In the summer time when the sun is hot the meat I cover up*

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<sup>1</sup> 'Meanings and origin of Australian words and idioms', Australian National University.

<sup>2</sup> The source for all the folk songs discussed is *The Big Book of Australian Folk Songs*, Ron Edwards, Rigby 1976

<sup>3</sup> The pint pot is a drinking vessel usually made from pewter holding a pint of liquid, in many cases alcohol.

*Or the flies will take it cantering round the old bark hut*  
*The Old Bark Hut*

Boiling the billy is so integral a part of the life of a drover that Nancy pleads to go with William making the offer ...

*I'll cook and boil your billy-can while at riding you will shine.*  
*Banks of the Condamine.*

### **Tea**

Tea was the regular drink of swaggies, overlanders and boundary riders.

*For I own I like my tea*  
*My quart-pot of post-and-rail tea*  
*And whenever I'm out, I carry about*  
*My quart-pot for post-and-rail tea.*  
*The Boundary Rider*

Why is it called post-and-rail tea?' It was poor quality tea, with particles of stalk and other impurities floating on its surface; such impurities may have been deliberately added to bulk out a grocer's measure.<sup>4</sup> And not just a grocer, station cooks were notable for doing the same.

How did they have their tea? I imagine it was strong and black or sweetened with sugar or molasses, fresh milk could not be carried.

Tea could mark class distinctions. Hyson was a high-quality tea.

*And here his worship lolls at ease and takes his smokes and snooze*  
*And quaffs his cup oh hysonskin, the beverage old chums choose*  
*The Squatter of The Olden Time*

The billy and tea are so often mentioned together that an Australian brand of tea is called *Billy Tea*

### **Cooking Utensils**

Just one song describing utensils.

*My cooking utensils, I'm sorry to say*  
*Consist of a knife, fork and spoon*  
*But there's bread, beef and tea in the battered Jack Shay*  
*Reedy Lagoon*

### **Damper**

Damper is a loaf of unleavened bread made with flour and water baked in the coals of a fire. Some used a rising agent like soda bicarbonate – there was controversy about this some holding that the latter was not a damper. Either way damper was standard fare for swaggies.

*A pannikin of flour and a sheet of bark*  
*To wallop up a damper in the dark*  
*The Lime-Juice Tub*

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<sup>4</sup> Greens Dictionary of Slang

*Poke up the fire to cook him some tea  
Salt junk and damper, oh that was his meal  
A Bullockies Song*

*I'll take care of beef and damper that you'll have quite enough  
We'll boil in the bucket such a whopper of a duff  
The Old Bullock Dray*

Johnny cakes<sup>5</sup> were also a bread as were brownies.

*It was hard to find a dry spot to cook your johnny-cake  
Australia's Happy Land*

*I'll teach you my darling, a damper how to make  
Fry (mutton) chops in the morning, and cook a brownie cake.<sup>6</sup>  
The Bloomin Queensland Side*

Songs are sometimes about rock hard dampers being thrown at someone.

*And you could not eat those dampers if one was chucked at you  
Banks of the Condamine*

*Man the tucker and let fly  
Brisbane Bess with a hunk of damper  
Caught Flash Joe right in the end  
The Bullockies Ball*

### **Rations**

Swagmen often called in to a station. It was understood that they would be given rations – tea, flour and mutton/beef.

*Poke up the fire to cook him some tea  
Salt junk and damper, oh that was his meal  
A Bullockies Song*

But there was no joy in this for some.

*On Monday we've mutton with damper and tea  
On Tuesday tea, damper and mutton  
On Wednesday we've damper, with mutton and tea  
On Thursday tea, mutton and damper*

Information about the best place to get rations was the subject of two songs

*When you are leaving camp you must ask some brother tramp  
If there are any jobs to be had  
Or what sort of a shop that station is to stop  
For a member of the Wallaby Brigade*

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<sup>5</sup> An American name adopted for smaller, thinner breads.

<sup>6</sup> A Brownie cake was much like a damper with sultanas and sometimes spices.

*You ask if they want men, you ask for rations then,  
If they don't stump up a warning should be made.  
To teach them better sense, why, 'Set fire their fence'  
Is the war cry of the Wallaby brigade  
The Wallaby Brigade*

*There's a good time coming boys, a good time coming  
Shepherd in the bush shan't be fed on damper chops and tea  
The Good Time Coming*

### **Bush food**

I found four songs here.

*So stir the wallaby stew, make soup of the kangaroo tail  
I tell you things is pretty rough since dad got put tin gaol  
Wallaby Stew*

*We lived on tea and damper  
And sometimes kangaroo  
The Pommy's Lament*

Other native animals are mentioned.

*I'm a roving jackaroo and often take pot luck  
From Maranoa to Paroo, of wonga, turkey, duck.  
Salt Junk*

*And that's just what the babbler gave us for tea  
Roasted go-anna, believe you me.  
The Cane Gang*

Occasionally there was a song about fish.

*Shoals of fish are swimming  
Try and catch a few  
Roma Downs*

### **Alcohol**

This was the topic for many songs.

Post sheep shearing was an occasion to drink.

*When the sheds are all cut out  
They get their bits of paper.  
To the nearest pub they run  
They cut a dashing caper  
They call for liquor plenty  
And they're happy while they're drinking  
But where to go when the money's done  
It's little they are thinking  
Jog Along Till Shearing*

*Shearing is all over and we've all got our cheques  
So it's roll up your swag boys we're off on the track  
The first pub we come to we'll all have spree  
And everyone who comes along it's come and drink with me  
Click Go The Shears*

*And it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog  
All for me beer and tobacco  
I've spent all me tin<sup>7</sup> on a lady drinking gin  
And across the western ocean I must wander  
Across the Western Ocean*

*We slings off our Matilda's and we walk into the bar  
And called for rum and raspberry and a shilling each cigar  
Lazy Harry's*

Alcohol was part of socialising at camp.

*Soon pintpots began to rattle  
The cry was "pass the rum this way  
The Bullockies Ball*

Alcohol had its downside.

*My beer and brandy brain sees balmy sleep in vain  
... Then hang the jolly prog, the hocussed shanty grog,  
The beer that's laced with tobacco  
Across the Western Ocean*

*Joe Gubbins and Bill White along with red-haired Sandy  
Get jumpy every night on the strongest port and brandy  
Australia Versus England*

*But they soon forget about those ten commandments  
When you hit em with a snort of O.P. Rum  
The Buffalo Shooter's Song*

### **Station Cooks**

I found three songs about station cooks

*Best at cooking corned beef  
Best at cooking stew  
Fact there isn't anything  
That I cannot do  
I can cook a damper  
Standin on my head  
Out In The Gulf*

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<sup>7</sup> Money

*The greasy cook with his sore-eyed look  
And the matter all stuck in his lashes  
He damned our souls with his half-baked rolls  
And he'd poison snakes with his hashes*

*The first six weeks so help me Christ  
We lived on cheese and half-boiled rice,  
Mouldy bread, and cats-meat stew  
And corned beef that the flies had blew  
The Cane Cutters Lament*

The other is the cook taking revenge against the shearers who no doubt have disparaged him as above.

*One day I thought 'I'll square things'.  
And let them see no mug was I  
So I mixed some sniftin' pea soup  
To make them fellows cry*

*Half a tin of curry.  
To give the stuff a grip  
And half a tine of pepper,  
To make the fellows shit.*

*And half a tin of cow dung,  
Singed to make it look like toast  
The stink of it would knockout down  
Like Jesus Holy Ghost.  
The Cook's Revenge*

### **Vegetables**

Surprisingly this was the only song to mention vegetables.

*Jim Baggs of Dead Horse Flat, a chap in leather gaiters  
Says he shall cultivate spring inguns, pease and 'tatures  
He says to raise French beans shall be his first endeavour  
And that we shall have our greens much cheaper now than ever  
Australia Versus England*

### **Continental food**

There was one song that mentioned smallgoods.

*The ham fat man, he fell deep in love  
All with Sara Ann, to be his turtle dove  
She dwelt in Sydney market, no 13 was her stand  
And she sold polony sausage to the ham fat man  
The Ham Fat Man*

**End of the yarnin'**

I couldn't resist putting in this sweet proposal.

*I have an old humpy  
A camp-oven or two  
A rifle and pig-dogs  
Now I only want you  
You'll never go hungry  
As long as you live  
With sweet-bucks and mangoes  
And slabs of wild pig  
The Pig Catcher's Love Song*