

MARK GREGORY

“The Bare Belled Ewe”

The Origin of “Click Go the Shears”

The shearers’ song “Click Go the Shears” and the 1890 Tom Roberts painting *Shearing the Rams* have much in common. Despite their present-day acceptance as cultural icons it was not always the case, particularly for the Roberts painting. The critic in the *Argus* in Melbourne, writing apparently on behalf of the National Art Gallery, which had chosen not to buy the painting, was profoundly disturbed by the artist’s choice of subject:

The smack of provinciality is as exceptionable and as distinctly a note of inferiority in art as in society ... The literal fact must pass through a transforming medium of human genius. To exactly copy a sheep-shearing is to invite us to look on at sheep-shearing, and not at a work of art. We do not go to an art-gallery to see how sheep are shorn.

What Roberts took great pains to show in his painting is an interest in working lives. To accomplish it he spent two shearing seasons drawing the activities that industrialised hand-shearing entailed at that time in Australia. The shed is organised and observed but it is the people at work who are foregrounded. Roberts responded to his critics, describing himself as a “a worker with the brush” and the scene before him of factory-like organisation:

So, lying on piled up wool-bales, and hearing and seeing the troops come pattering into their pens, the quick running of the wool-carriers, the screwing of the presses, the subdued hum of hard, fast working, and the rhythmic click of the shears, the whole lit warm with the reflection of Australian sunlight, it seemed that I had there the best expression of my subject, a subject noble enough and worthy enough if I could express the meaning and spirit—of strong masculine labour, the patience of the animals whose year’s growth is being stripped from them for man’s use, and the great human interest of the whole scene.

The scene in the painting is also in the iconic song published eighteen months later. Roberts writes in his letter that had he been a poet he might have:

described the scattered flocks on sunlit plains and gum-covered ranges, the coming of spring, the gradual massing of the sheep towards that one centre, the woolshed through which the accumulated growth and wealth of the year is carried; the shouts of the men, the galloping of horses and the barking of dogs as the thousands are driven, half seen, through the hot dust cloud, to the yards; then the final act, and the dispersion of the denuded sheep.

The song we now call “Click Go the Shears” does in fact cover much of the territory described by Roberts. As I discovered in 2013, it was published on December 5, 1891, in the Victorian country newspaper the *Bacchus Marsh Express* with the title “The Bare Belled Ewe”. The fact that it was discovered after lying hidden for 132 years is testament again to the treasures being unearthed by the digitisation of Australian newspapers. Until this discovery the song had been known in fragmentary form, and the most complete version, the one that became standard, was published by the folk-song collector Dr Percy Jones in 1946. (Indeed, some scholars suspected it had been composed in the 1940s—see Keith McKenry’s article on the subject in *Quadrant*, March 2009.)

Here then is the original version, from 1891:

The Bare Belled Ewe

(Tune—“Ring the bell, watchman.”)

Oh, down at the catching pen an old shearer
stands,
Grasping his shears in his long bony hands;
Fixed is his gaze on a bare belled ewe,
Saying “If I can only get her, won’t I make the
ringer go.”

"THE BARE BELLED EWE"

Click goes his shears; click, click, click.
Wide are the blows, and his hand is moving
 quick,
The ringer looks round, for he lost it by a blow,
And he curses that old shearers with the bare
 belled ewe.

This second verse became the chorus to the song in the fragments recalled by bush singers. It soon gave the song the title it is stuck with today.

At the end of the board, in a cane-bottomed chair,
The boss remains seated with his eyes
 everywhere;
He marks well each fleece as it comes to the
 screen,
And he watches where it comes from if not
 taken off clean.

The "colonial experience" is there of course.
With his silver buckled leggings, he's just off his
 horse;
With the air of a connoisseur he walks up the floor;
And he whistles that sweet melody, "I am a
 perfect cure."

The colonial experience man, sent out to the colonies to learn the empire's business, was a favourite butt of shearers, who compared their skills with the lack of skills of the observer from Britain.

"So master new chum, you may now begin,
Muster number seven paddock, bring the sheep
 all in;
Leave none behind you, whatever you do,
And then we'll say you'r fit to be a Jackaroo."

Jackaroos and new chums are usually young trainees learning on the job. As they gain experience they move to more skilled work.

The tar boy is there, awaiting all demands,
With his black tarry stick, in his black tarry hands.
He sees an old ewe, with a cut upon the back,
He hears what he supposes is—"Tar here, Jack."

"Tar on the back, Jack; Tar, boy, tar."
Tar from the middle to both ends of the board.
Jack jumps around, for he has no time to sleep,
And tars the shearers' backs as well as the sheep.

So now the shearing's over, each man has got his
 cheque,
The hut is as dull as the dullest old wreck;
Where was many a noise and bustle only a few

hours before,
Now you can hear it plainly if a pin fall on the
 floor.

The shearers now are scattered many miles and
 far;
Some in other sheds perhaps, singing out for
 "tar."
Down at the bar, there the old shearers stands,
Grasping his glass in his long bony hands.

Saying "Come on, landlord, come on, come!
I'm shouting for all hands, what's yours—mine's
 a rum;"
He chucks down his cheque, which is collared in
 a crack,
And the landlord with a pen writes no mercy on
 the back!

Landlords of outback pubs are another favourite target of shearers' chagrin, especially ones who short-changed the shearers or tampered with the quality of the drink.

His eyes they were fixed on a green painted keg,
Saying "I will lower your contents, before I move
 a peg."
His eyes are on the keg, and are now lowering
 fast;
He works hard, he dies hard, and goes to heaven
 at last.

C. C., Eynesbury, Nov. 20, 1891.

Eynesbury, south-east of Bacchus Marsh, was one of the largest sheep stations in Victoria, and according to a heritage evaluation may have had brick quarters for the shearers.

The last line of the song was reworked by its shearers into the more larrikin, "He works hard, he drinks hard, and goes to hell at last."

My searches of online newspapers have revealed over thirty items of shearers' songs and poems composed and published during 1891. The well-known ones come from the pens of the shearers' supporters like E.J. Brady and Henry Lawson, but many others are there too, including two from the O'Callaghan Opera Company, which raised over £100 for the strike fund in a show in Charters Towers. They were both published by the Queensland newspaper the *Worker* many years after the event, possibly because of the danger of publishing seditious material in the year of the strike. One of them, titled "A Song of '91", was sung by Corporal Callahan:

“THE BARE BELLED EWE”

Your brave defenders are engaged in battle's
stern array,
They're going into the bush to fight for glory, not
for pay;
On shearers and on rouseabouts we'll make the
bullets pour,
We're Queensland's standing army, and we're
ordered on to war.

Chorus:

To the war, to the war; we'll all go marching to
the war;
When the drums are beating and the sheep are
bleating
And all the little lambs go “Baa, baa, baa!”
Then a-tramping, a-stamping, and a-ramping
with a rush,
We'll guard against stray bullets at the war out
in the bush.

There's no one knows what we can do when we
go to the West,
But we can give a guarantee to do our very best;
We'll keep our bellies full of grub; its orders and
the law
Of Queensland's bold defenders when they're
marching on to war.

Among the squatters' mutton we will promise to
succeed;
We'll grease our chops with fine fat lambs of

pure merino breed;
So let the trumpet sound again, we hear the
battle roar.
We'll glory gain in hatfuls when we're fighting
in the war.

So sling your best leg forward, boys, and buckle
on the gun,
For scabs and blacklegs roll along; there'll soon
be whips of fun;
Though every shearers in the land with bullet
holes we'll bore,
For none can stand before us when we're fighting
in the war.

With deeds of cruel carnage, with battles lost,
and won,
You'll shed a tear of sympathy for every mother's
son;
For every way-worn sodger who perished in his
gore
When out as scab-protectors in that cruel sheep-
skin war.

Mark Gregory has a lifelong interest in folk songs. He has curated several online collections of his research material, and in his 2014 doctoral thesis he gathered and analysed 150 poems/songs from the convict era to the end of the Great Depression. A third of these songs and poems were discovered through online searches of Australian newspapers.

In 1939 two NSW newspapers published two more versions of the song under the title “The Shearers Song” both in response to readers enquiries. It is quite possible that Percy Jones on a visit to Sydney in 1940 discovered or was shown one of these versions. The newspapers are The World's News 26 August 1939 p. 45. and The Wellington Times 21 Dec 1939 p. 9.