



# **COLLECTED POEMS** by Banjo Paterson

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#### **Teacher's Notes Prepared By Kevin Densley**

# The Author and His Place in Australian Literature

Andrew Barton, "Banjo", Paterson was born on his grandparents' property near Orange, New South Wales, in 1864. He spent much of his boyhood living in the country. Alongside Henry Lawson, he is Australia's best known and most popular writer, famous for his verse on "bush" subject-matter. Like Lawson, he had early success contributing pieces to the *Bulletin* magazine in the 1880s. His first book, *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses*, appeared in 1895 and was an instant best-seller. Later volumes of verse included *Rio Grande's Last Race* (1902) and *Saltbush Bill, J.P.* (1917). As well as verse, Paterson wrote novels, including *An Outback Marriage* (1906) and did a great deal of journalistic work.

After he ceased his career as a Sydney solicitor in 1899, much of the remainder of his life was spent in journalism. He edited and wrote freelance work for a variety of publications. One of his more notable early journalistic appointments was as official war correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in which capacity

he covered the Boer War. In 1939, he received a C.B.E. for his services to Australian literature. He died in Sydney, after a short illness, in 1941.

# **COLLECTED POEMS – Overview**

Banjo Paterson's *Collected Poems* contains well over two hundred individual pieces.

The intention in this section of the notes, therefore, is not to offer detailed commentary – a book length treatment would be required for that - but rather to give a basic overview of the text.

Many writers, when their body of work is under discussion, get unfairly pigeonholed. One example which immediately comes to mind is Emily Dickinson, who is regarded by many as a poet who wrote primarily "about death". In Dickinson's case, this characterization is both inaccurate and unfair, as she wrote well and extensively on a considerable range of topics. However, it is appropriate that - when Paterson's literary work is discussed - the emphasis is upon him as a writer of bush verse. In his Collected Poems by far the majority of the verse is about bush subject-matter, whether the focus be on such aspects of the bush as drovers, early "pioneers", humorous bush incidents or country race meetings. Also, more importantly, it is true to say that all his most popular individual poems – and, arguably, his best ones - are those with a bush focus, such as "The Man from Snowy River", "Clancy of the Overflow", "The Man from Ironbark" and "Mulga Bill's Bicycle", about the old chap "from Eaglehawk, that caught the cycling craze". This having been said, it is also worthwhile to note that a significant amount of the work in this collection is focused on non-bush material. In this context, there are - to cite but a few examples - "The Boss of the Admiral Lynch", about a Chilean gunboat captain,

"The Pearl Diver" and a number of poems related to the Boer War, such as "Johnny Boer" and "Driver Smith".

In general terms, Paterson's verse is characterized by a sense of humour, storytelling flair and an intimate knowledge of the bush that he wrote about so extensively and obviously loved. An indication of the power of his work to strike a responsive chord with his reading audience was the fact that, around the turn of the century, it was considerably more popular than that of his main literary "rival" in the same field, Henry Lawson. Quite possibly, this is still the case today. This does not, however, necessarily reflect upon the respective literary merits of the two writers' work. Popular taste and artistic merit are, as history has proved time and time again, very separate issues.

On the evidence of his *Collected Poems*, the issue of artistic merit was not of special concern to Paterson – and this is not meant negatively. Indeed, one of the most likeable qualities of his work is its lack of pretension. He is not a complex or experimental writer on a technical level, choosing for the most part to write within traditionally popular verse forms, primarily the bush ballad. What Paterson was, and remains, though, is a writer with a great gift in terms of communicating to, and therefore connecting with, his reader. His work is held in high regard by many Australians for this very reason. Perhaps Paterson's admirably unassuming attitude towards writing is best summed up in a late verse, "Song of the Pen", in which he indicates respect both for the writer who "toils at an epic high" and the one who writes "so that a child may laugh".

# **COLLECTED POEMS** – Major Themes

The major themes of Paterson's *Collected Poems* include the following:

- life in the bush is freer, less confining than life in the big cities
- a sense of humour lightens the difficulties of bush life
- the bush contains more interesting "characters" than the city
- the city offers a soft, artificial existence, the bush an authentic one
- the bush is a place for men to show their true mettle; it is less suited to women
- the bush can send people a bit "barmy" due to its isolation and hardships

All of the themes listed above are worthy of detailed discussion. No doubt the list can be extended.

# <u>COLLECTED POEMS – Discussion Questions</u>

- 1. How would you describe Paterson's view of the bush?
- 2. Does Paterson's view of the bush ring true? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 3. Given that most people in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Australia lived in cities, was Paterson, in his focus on the bush, really writing about the "true Australia" even then?

- 4. "The city folk go to and fro / Behind a prison's bars, / They never feel the breezes blow / And never see the stars ..." This is what Paterson writes in "Old Australian Ways". Do these lines encapsulate the basic reason why Paterson prefers the life of the country to that of the city?
- 5. Why do you think Paterson has become one of the most popular writers in Australian literary history?
- 6. Do you think Paterson is, on the whole, merely a skilful popular writer or does his work have serious literary merit? Or, indeed, has he been successful in both respects?
- 7. Did you encounter Paterson's verse at school? If so, what poems do you remember and what do you think of them now? Has your opinion changed?
- 8. What do you think of the verse Paterson occasionally wrote about non-rural subject matter? Is it as good as the work he is best known for?
- 9. In a number of works, Paterson uses Aboriginal characters. (See, for example, "Frying Pan's Theology", "Johnson's Antidote" and "Saltbush Bill, J.P."), How, in general terms, does he represent Aboriginal people?
- 10. If you are familiar with Henry Lawson's writing about the bush, which do you prefer his or Paterson's? Why?

- 11. On the evidence of *Collected Poems*, do you agree with A.G. Stephens of the *Bulletin* when he said of Paterson's work: "It isn't very deep, and the deeper it aims at being the less it succeeds; but it is stirring, manly stuff, which it rejoices one to read and remember". Discuss this comment in some detail.
- 12. How, overall, does Paterson represent his female characters?
- 13. Name a couple of your favourite Paterson poems. Why did you select these?