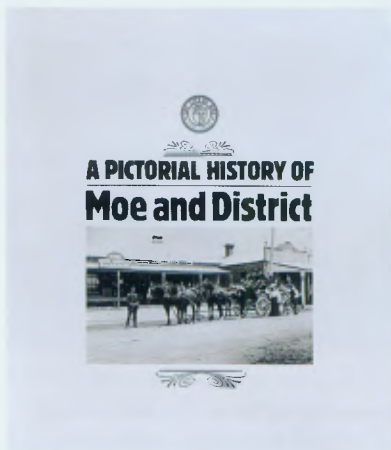


A Sense of Place

Life, Death and Music in an Industrial Town¹



Based on her research and her experiences with the Moe Folklife Project in the La Trobe Valley of Victoria, Gwenda Davey discusses the role of music in conveying a sense of place

Goodbye, Melbourne Town, Melbourne
Town, Goodbye;
I am leaving you today for a country far
away,
Though today I'm stoney broke without a
single brown,
If I make a fortune I'll come back and
spend it
In dear old Melbourne Town.



These words, and their poignant melody, are as much as many Australians know of the song 'Goodbye Melbourne Town'. If they know the song at all, they almost certainly believe it to be a First World War 'diggers' song, sung as the troop ships sailed away from Station Pier. The sheet music of 'Goodbye Melbourne Town' held in the National Library, however, gives 1908 as the date for the copyright, and Fred Hall as the writer of the music. The song was also 'written and sung' by Leonard Nelson. The verses

of 'Goodbye Melbourne Town' refer to 'a brave honest lad' who was 'leaving Australia, the land of his birth, where he'd failed to succeed though he'd tried'. Rather than belonging to the First World War, it is likely that the song reflects the hard times which troubled Australia in the two decades surrounding the turn of the century.

It is no longer fashionable for popular music to be written about specific places in Australia, although prior to the Second World War there were a great many. During my

(above) Sheet music for 'Goodbye Melbourne Town', c.1908
From the Music collection

(above left) Title page from *A Pictorial History of Moe and District* (Moe: Moe and District Historical Society, 1988), featuring the Moe Hotel with the Walhalla coach in front, 1900
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Harold White Fellowship at the National Library in 1989, I searched for 'location songs', and was able to identify 60 different places referred to in the Library's sheet music



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collections; there may well be many more. Among those I found, those beginning with the letter D, for example, included Dubbo, Daydream Island, Darwin, Dorrigo, Darling and the Dandenongs! Some of the songs are still recognised today, even if only by their titles. 'Along the Road to Gundagai' by Jack O'Hagan (1922) is probably the best known. 'I'm Going Back Again to Yarrowonga' (1919) was a First World War song, and refers to both Gallipoli and the 'first Anzac Brigade'. Both words and music were by Corporal Neil McBeath A.I.F., and there is also a New Zealand version, 'I'm Going Back Again to Wanganui'. It is not certain which version was 'sung with wonderful success throughout the world by Miss Ella Shields', as the sheet music cover informs us—perhaps both!

In the 1990s, it is easy to be cynical about the naivete of some of these pre-war location songs. It's hard to imagine any of today's Australians, whether Canberra residents or not, singing Jack Lumsdaine's 1938 song about Canberra, 'Canberra's Calling to You'. The chorus is as follows:

Like a jewel so rare in a setting so fair
A city of white was born;
With its gardens of blooms and its rare perfumes
That greet each sunny morn,
Australia's creation the heart of a nation
'Neath azure skies of blue,
Wherever you are, be it near or far
Canberra's calling to you.

Yet even the most sentimental lyric in location songs often contains some interesting social history, and a sense of the importance of place. In 1988 I interviewed Mrs Jean Phillips in Moonee Ponds, Melbourne, for the National Library's Oral History Section.² Jean Phillips had lived in Canberra from 1927, when her father became one of the first doormen at Parliament House. The family had left the slums and boot factories of Collingwood, and her mother regarded their move to Canberra as 'coming to Paradise', even though the shops were in tents.

I do not believe that Australians have lost their 'sense of place',



Reconstructed barrister's and solicitor's office, 'Old Gippsdown', Moe, 1995
Photograph by Jennifer Aitken
From the Pictorial collection

(below) Detail from sheet music for 'I'm Going Back Again to Yarrowonga', c.1919
From the Music collection



although commercial popular music no longer regards this as a fashionable topic. It is for this reason that I was surprised to find during the Moe Folklife Project³ in 1995 a number of contemporary songs written about this small Victorian industrial town and about its neighbour, the dead city of Yallourn.

The City of Moe is the first of the three towns in the La Trobe Valley—the towns of Moe, Morwell and Traralgon. This region is the centre of Victoria’s brown coal mining and electricity industry. Apart from the distant steam and smoke from the power generating stations, you can’t properly see the industrial complex until you cross the Haunted Hills between Moe and Morwell. What you can mostly see from Moe are the beautiful rolling green hills to the south and the snow caps of Mt Baw to the north.

Moe has about 17 000 people, most of them brought in as immigrants from all over the world by the powerful State Electricity Commission, to work in the mines and power stations. Times are hard in Moe, and it has some unique demographic features. It has more elderly people, more single parents with dependent children, and more overseas-born residents than other towns in the La Trobe Valley. It has lower incomes than the rest of the Valley, or Victoria in general, and more unemployment than either the Valley or Victoria as a whole.⁴

In colonial days, Moe was a tiny stopping place for travellers on their way to the gold rushes at Walhalla. It remained a small settlement until 1946, when the Housing Commission of Victoria began to build houses in Moe and its suburb



(top) Sunny Creek schoolhouse (relocated), ‘Old Gippstown’, Moe, 1995
Photograph by Jennifer Aitken
From the Pictorial collection

(centre) Recreated interior, Narracan general store, ‘Old Gippstown’, Moe, 1995
Photograph by Jennifer Aitken
From the Pictorial collection

(bottom) Moe Hotel, Lloyd Street, Moe, 1995
Photograph by Jennifer Aitken
From the Pictorial collection



of Newborough. It grew and lived vigorously between 1946 and 1986, when the restructuring, retrenchments and privatisation of the Victorian electricity industry began to bite into Moe's prosperity.

Is the City of Moe dying? Will it join its neighbouring ghost town of Yallourn, totally destroyed or removed during the 1970s for the coal underneath?⁵ But Yallourn isn't dead. Today it might be just a great hole in the ground, but Yallourn is still very much alive in folk memory. Many Yallourn residents now live in Newborough and Moe, many in former Yallourn houses moved to new sites. The Moe Folklife Project has interviewed a number of former Yallourn residents, as part of our storytelling component and to assist the Yallourn Heritage Trail, a cultural tourism plan to trace the history of Yallourn and its houses. There is still widespread mourning about the destruction of Yallourn, and one Moe interviewee described many former Yallourn residents as 'living in exile' in Moe.⁶ It's not surprising then that the popular musician Michael Thomas from *Weddings, Parties, Anything* described his song about Yallourn, 'Industrial Town', as a 'hymn':

Down in the valley, the valley so low,
Lay the town over, hear the winds blow.
Lay the town over, dig it all in,
For what we once had will not come again.

The people are crying, the people are
down,
They look at the crevice where once lived
a town,
And it's not for the money, it's not for the
blame,
They just cry for a ghost town, that's such
a great shame ...

Now Old King Coal was a merry old soul,
And a merry old soul was he,
Cause he fed my Dad and he fed my
Mum,
Kept us children three.
And I remember the Old Coach Road,
And the pine trees by its side,
And I remember the playground there,
And every swing and slide.

It's goodbye to you my old grey friend,
Soon your days are at an end,
They'll dig you up, tear you down,
Goodbye to you—industrial town.

Time moved on, we moved away,
How a young child soon forgets,
Twelve years later I returned,
And I see with regret,
Empty houses, empty streets,
Not a single soul to meet,
Sold right out, damned on whim,
Sing this chorus, sing this hymn.

Not all the industry in Moe is to do with power and coal. Chris Falk and the Sisters of Endless Production produced a cassette of songs, *Spinning Out in the Textile Mills*, songs based on the stories of workers from

(left) Yallourn power station and the open cut mine, c.1960
Reproduced from *Yallourn, Victoria, Australia* (Melbourne: State Electricity Commission of Victoria, 1962)
Reproduced with the permission of Yallourn Energy Ltd

(top right) The township of Yallourn, c.1940
From the Pictorial collection

(above) Heather Frendo, a worker at the Rocklea Spinning Mills, Moe
Photograph by Peter Morrison
Photograph courtesy of Gwenda Davey

the Rocklea Spinning Mill in Moe and the CHL Apparel factory in Churchill. Some of the songs are about problems such as shiftwork and repetitive strain injury, and unpopular jobs such as 'doffing', or replacing the full bobbins with empty ones:

How many doffs will I have to do today
How many doffs will I have to do today
At least thirty before I can go out and play.

Production, production they're callin out
for more
Production, production, but the quality's
so poor
Got the foreman on my back he's such a
bore ...

One more doff before I knock off today
One more doff before I knock off today
The only thing that keeps me here is
picking up me pay
The only thing that keeps me here is
picking up me pay.

Other songs simply reflect the importance of the factory as a source of employment. The song called 'Sisters of Endless Production' describes how 'many families all end up working together at the same factory':

Well I hung up my school bag when I was
fifteen

To work with my sisters at the mill
Although the pay was only sixteen dollars
Clothes and records, I wanted my fill

We're the sisters of endless production
Feed in that cotton we won't take no
reduction

We were young and innocent
But then we had to pay the rent
And we worked out a thing or two.

Me Mum's top winder up the front,
My sister's foreman and on me back
Me other ones are carding cotton
My brother's lurking somewhere,
Oh let me tell you ... oh dear!
He's so lazy we'd rather forget him.

The sense of place is not just about work or about location. It's also about the people who live in a particular place, and it isn't always complimentary. Another local group of musicians is Boola Boola, and one of their songs, 'Unemployment Blues', referred to 'the welfare scar'. I've found this to be a common image both among Moe people themselves, and among others in the La Trobe Valley. There's a Housing Commission area in Moe commonly called 'The Bronx', for example. Boola Boola have another song called 'Moe Man', which recalls a common slur that all Moe men wear moccasins, or 'moccies', that contemporary symbol of poverty. For a long time Moe has been thought of as a tough town, symbolised by the now defunct hotel called 'the Bloodhouse'. I think in this song it's wrongly called 'the Bloodbath':

One hundred million years ago
When wood turned into coal we know,
When dinosaurs roamed the land,
Their footprints in the river sand.
People of the sun, the soil
Around the fire they once toiled.



People of the Goonai,
In Moe they still live and die ...

From Westbury down to Narracan,
I was dreaming I was a Moe man;
In my moccies and Faberge
Went out on Saturday night to play,
To Leggies or the Bloodbath,
Cruisin' in the car with Garth.
Me Dad worked at the SEC,
So did he and so did he,
Digging coal and playing cards,
Having barbies in their backyards.

Negative images of Moe are common, but the extensive research carried out by the Moe Folklife Project research team shows clearly that this is a very unbalanced view. The Project has demonstrated that the town possesses a rich, almost underground, culture of traditional life. It's expressed in handcrafts, foodways, family celebrations, calendar customs surrounding Easter, Christmas and other times, children's traditional playground games, storytelling, music and dance.

The great diversity of its rich folk culture is contributing to the continued life of Moe, industrial town. So too is the deep love of place. An Italian prisoner of war during the Second World War was assigned to a farm in Moe. 'One day,' he said, 'I'm coming back to buy this farm.' Joe Rosato did just that.⁷

Gwenda Davey (left), giving a lecture at the National Library on its folklore holdings, May 1989
From the Pictorial collection

Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented by Gwenda Beed Davey to the Orff 100 International Music Conference held at Monash University, Melbourne, in July 1995. All songs quoted have been with the authors' permission.

2 Oral History Section, TRC 2295/8.

3 The Moe Folklife Project has been studying the traditional culture and folklife of Moe throughout 1995. It is funded by the National Library of Australia and the Department of Communication and the Arts, under the auspices of the National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University.

4 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census*, 1991. Quoted in *Profile of the City of Moe* (Traralgon, Vic: Latrobe Regional Commission, 1994) prepared by the Gippsland Research and Information Bank, Monash University.

5 See, for example, Prue McGoldrick, *Yallourn Was...* (Morwell Vic: Gippsland Printers, 1984).

6 Associate Professor Daryl Nation, interviewed by Gwenda Davey for the National Library of Australia and the Moe Folklife Project, 8 June 1995. TRC 3270.

7 Personal communication, John Battista. Joe Rosato is John Battista's maternal uncle.

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