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Who Wrote The Words To Waltzing Matilda

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The Mystery Solved: Who Wrote the Words to Waltzing Matilda?

Few songs are as deeply woven into the fabric of a nation as "Waltzing Matilda" is for Australia. Often called the country's unofficial national anthem, its iconic refrain—"Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?"—echoes through schoolyards, sporting events, and campfires. Yet, for all its popularity, a surprising number of people find themselves asking: **who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda**? The answer leads us to one of Australia's most beloved poets, but the full story involves an interesting collaboration, a dash of folklore, and a journey across the outback.

The Simple Answer: Banjo Paterson

The words to "Waltzing Matilda" were written by **Andrew Barton "Banjo" Paterson**, a famous Australian bush poet, journalist, and author. Paterson penned the lyrics in 1895, and they were first published as a poem. He is the sole credited author of the text, though the melody was adapted from a traditional folk tune. To understand the song's origin, we need to look at the circumstances that inspired Paterson to write these now-legendary verses.

The Journey to Dagworth Station

In 1895, Banjo Paterson was staying at **Dagworth Station**, a large cattle station in Queensland, owned by the Macpherson family. He had traveled there to visit his fiancée, Sarah Riley, who was a friend of the Macphersons. During his stay, Paterson experienced the harsh beauty and rugged life of the Australian outback. He also heard local stories and ballads, including a popular Scottish tune called "The Bonnie Lass o' Fyvie" (also known as "The Trooper and the Maid").

It was at Dagworth that Paterson was introduced to a man named **James Fagan**, a local farmer and musician. Fagan played a haunting melody on a zither (a type of string instrument), a tune that would become the musical backbone of "Waltzing Matilda." While some accounts suggest Fagan co-wrote the music, the words are entirely Paterson's creation. The question "Who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda?" is therefore settled: it was Banjo Paterson who placed the swagman, the jumbuck, and the billabong into the English language.

What Inspired the Lyrics?

The words Paterson wrote were not drawn from thin air. They were a collage of real Australian experiences, landscapes, and even a controversial event. The central story—a swagman who steals a sheep and then drowns himself rather than be captured—is believed to have been inspired by the **Dagworth shearers' strike** of 1891 and a specific tragic incident. In 1894, a shearer named Samuel Hoffmeister was accused of burning

down a woolshed at Dagworth Station. While fleeing from police, Hoffmeister shot himself beside a billabong—the same fate Paterson's swagman chooses.

Paterson, however, softened the story. In his lyrics, the swagman is a sympathetic figure, a free-spirited bushman who defies authority. This romanticized view of the "larrikin" Australian was exactly the kind of character Paterson loved to write about.

The Language of the Bush

To fully appreciate who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda, we must understand the language Paterson used. "Waltzing Matilda" is a phrase rich in Australian slang:

- Waltzing – derived from the German "auf der Walz," meaning to travel or wander in a traditional way.
- Matilda – a slang term for a swag (the bedroll a traveling worker carries). "Waltzing Matilda" therefore means to travel with your swag.
- Swagman – a traveling worker who carries his belongings in a swag.
- Billabong – a waterhole or branch of a river that forms a pool.
- Jumbuck – a colloquial Australian term for a sheep.
- Squatter – a wealthy landowner who originally settled on land.
- Tucker bag – a bag for carrying food.
- Coolibah tree – a type of eucalyptus tree common in the Australian outback.

Paterson's choice of these specific words gave the song an unmistakably Australian identity. The question of **who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda** is thus also a question of who captured that unique linguistic flavor for the world.

The First Publication and Musical Adaptation

Paterson's poem was first published in the *Bulletin*, a popular Sydney magazine, in 1895, under the title "Waltzing Matilda." It was presented as a poem to be sung to the tune of "The Bonnie Lass o' Fyvie." However, the version of the melody we know today is largely credited to **Christina Macpherson**, the sister of the owner of Dagworth Station. She played the tune for Paterson, and together they shaped the song. Some historians argue that she deserves partial credit for the music, but the words are undisputedly Paterson's.

Later, in 1903, the song was included in a music collection by **Marie Cowan**, who arranged the melody into the version most commonly sung today. But again, the question **who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda** remains consistent: Banjo Paterson.

Misattributions and Myths

Over the decades, various myths have emerged about the author of the lyrics. Some have claimed it was an anonymous folk song, while others suggested that Paterson simply collected older verses. However, thorough research by musicologists and historians has confirmed that Paterson was the original author. His notebooks and letters clearly show the creative process behind the poem. The melody, however, was borrowed and adapted, which is why some confusion persists. When you ask **who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda**, the answer is always Banjo Paterson, even if he did not compose the tune.

The Legacy of the Words

Paterson's words have taken on a life far beyond his original poem. "Waltzing Matilda" has been recorded by countless artists, from folk singers to opera stars. It has been used in film scores, patriotic events, and even as a protest song. The imagery he created—the swagman under the shade of a coolibah tree, the jumbuck in the billabong—is now an indelible part of Australian culture.

The song's popularity even led to a long debate about whether it should become Australia's national anthem. In the 1970s, a plebiscite saw "Waltzing Matilda" receive significant support, but "Advance Australia Fair" ultimately took the title. Nevertheless, for many Australians, Paterson's words remain the true anthem of the bush.

Why the Question Still Matters

Understanding **who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda** is not just a trivia fact. It connects us to a specific time and place in Australian history. Banjo Paterson was more than a poet; he was a chronicler of the outback's spirit. His words gave voice to the itinerant workers, the dreamers, and the rebels. The swagman's choice to "jump into the billabong" rather than be captured is a powerful statement about freedom and defiance. Knowing Paterson wrote these words helps us appreciate the layers of meaning in what seems like a simple song.

Comparing Other Claims: The Role of James Fagan and Christina Macpherson

Some sources mention James Fagan and Christina Macpherson as co-creators of the song. To be precise: James Fagan played the tune first; Christina Macpherson remembered it and played it for Paterson. Neither wrote the lyrics. Paterson himself acknowledged their musical influence but never suggested they contributed any words. If anyone asks **who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda**, the documentation is clear: it is Banjo Paterson's original work.

Conclusion

So, the next time you hear the familiar lines, "Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong," you can confidently answer the question: the words were written by the legendary Australian poet Banjo Paterson. His 1895 poem captured the heart of the Australian bush and became a global cultural treasure. While the melody has roots in older tunes and the song evolved through musical arrangers, the lyrics remain Paterson's cherished creation. Knowing the full story of **who wrote the words to Waltzing Matilda** adds depth to every verse and a richer appreciation for the land that inspired them.

The song lives on, not just as a piece of music, but as a testament to the art of storytelling—and to the genius of the man who put "Waltzing Matilda" into the world's vocabulary.

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