

*George H. Nadel*

## THE KANGAROO AND THE UNION TICKET

IT HAPPENED in Melbourne not very long ago. The streetcars weren't running, nor were the buses. The citizens carrying their lunches in curious little suitcases or in paper bags had set out half an hour or an hour earlier to get to work as best as they could. I could not tell whether they were annoyed, but they certainly did not look surprised. For what Australians call their "tram-strike" had happened often enough before to make the average commuter an expert at telling from certain signs that the strike is "on." A sure sign may be the news bulletin of the night before, according to which the secretary of the bricklayers' union has called on fellow unionists to show their solidarity against the government. Another indication, requiring a trained ear, is the absence of the familiar rattle and clang-clang of the early morning streetcars which share with the alarm clocks the duty of rousing all sleepers within half a mile of the principal suburban thoroughfares. The final sign is more uncertain yet: the fruitless half-hour wait at the streetcar stop does not tell you whether the strike is really on, or whether there is merely a re-routing of services, a go-slow protest, a power failure, or perhaps nothing at all.

In any case, here were the Melbournians—or at least those who did not own cars or motorbikes—trudging stoically down Toorak Road to get to the centre of the city. I pulled up at a corner and a young, heavy-set worker got in. "Thanks, mate," he said, "she isn't so good walking all the way." ("Mate" is at once both appellation and accolade as used by the Australian worker; "she" refers to an unspecified enemy—the hardships of life, the weather, or any difficult task.)

There was no conversation for a while. In a country where manliness is a cult and quiet resignation to adversity a supreme virtue, manly silence is the proper conversational currency among equals. So we kept silence; he instinctively and I consciously. When the junction of Toorak and St. Kilda Roads made some information necessary, I ventured a casual "going far?" "No," the hitch-hiker replied, "other side of town." Eventually he told me he was bound for Carlton. Since I

did not think he attended the University of Melbourne (but could not be sure), I hazarded the guess that he worked at the other great institution in that suburb, the brewery. This proved correct, and so I made the usual deferentially envious noises reserved for such fortunate people. For access to beer, its acquisition and consumption, are to most Australians more or less exactly what access to money, and its acquisition and consumption, are to Americans. Anyone who has never tasted Australian beer, which is about twice as strong as American beer, cannot appreciate this and will, moreover, until he does, remain ignorant of one of the greatest pleasures, according to the average Australian, that Dionysus has to offer.

My passenger was evidently not in this category of ignoramuses. He told me that his biggest problem was getting home in time for supper, especially with this strike. The bars in Melbourne close at six p.m., allowing to those who work the single swill-hour from five to six. Getting home on time during a strike might well mean having to leave the city by five; this in turn meant to forgo one's beer, which nine out of ten Melbournians are constitutionally unable to do. That was a weighty problem indeed, but happily for my passenger, and for his family awaiting him for supper ("tea"), the free beer-ration to which brewery employees were supposedly entitled would help him out of this spot—or at least so he announced after much thoughtful frowning.

A few more words were spoken. We did not discuss the strike, the original cause of the complications with which his mind was grappling the rest of the way. I surmised that like most Australians he would be prepared to curse the personal inconvenience to him and at the same time magnanimously assert, what the heck, it was all for a good cause, and the poor blokes working the trams deserved a holiday as much as the next man.

Eventually our slow progress down the beautiful tree-lined St. Kilda Road came to an end. We had reached the city limits, Prince's Bridge, which connects Swanston Street, Melbourne's main city street, to St. Kilda Road. At the other end of the bridge is a corner dominated by St. Paul's Cathedral and Young & Jackson's Pub; it is called Young & Jackson's corner. There we came to a halt. He clambered out of the car, slammed the door, and poked his head in through the window. I prepared a laboured smile, the one car owners use to ward off hitch-hikers' thanks without wanting to appear patronizing. But it was not necessary. He merely said "Blokes like you ought to be shot; there's the strikers holdin' out for their mates, and youse give lifts to people.—Scab!" and was gone.

There are of course days in Melbourne and other Australian capital cities when there are no strikes, especially in recent years. But somehow such days are not typi-

cally Australian. Strikes are after all only a more organized form of the perpetual resentment most Australians feel against employers, working-hours, foremen, and work in general. Australians are very sensible about this, and conservatives and communists are always trying to make this natural resentment look like a political affair, which it is not. No Pilgrim Fathers or Puritan divines ever told Australians that work is a good thing; no captains of industry or financial tycoons ever became respectable enough in this working-class country to sell the idea that hard work, free enterprise, and self-help are more desirable and virtuous than state aid and social security from the cradle to the grave. It is no coincidence that Australia is exceptionally strong in tennis players and labour unions. In a country of sunshine, beaches, race courses, and tennis courts, work is doomed to remain the intruder, and the employers and other *soi disant* superiors have to be curbed as the devils who personify this intrusion into the leisurely, manly life.

Behind this enviable laziness is a uniquely Australian creed, and thinking about it somehow lessened the anger I might have felt at my hitch-hiker's ingratitude. It is a gospel in which disrespect and truculence are balanced by the noble feeling of solidarity with one's fellows; it is usually called the gospel of mateship. Like all the myths and legends the Australian has about himself, it originated in the country, in the bush. To understand the Australians—a nation so heavily urbanized that over a third of its nine million inhabitants live in two cities, Sydney and Melbourne—you must look around in the bush.

Too many people think that the most distinguished inhabitant of the Australian bush is the kangaroo. Even the very first poem published in Australia, written by an Englishman who in 1817 had come as a judge to the convict establishment at Botany Bay, began

Kangaroo, Kangaroo  
Thou spirit of Australia . . .

Unfortunately, this is most misleading. It is true that if you travel in some of the outback country you might very well encounter a few mobs of these bounding denizens of the bush; the farmers in Queensland and New South Wales, who shoot the kangaroos as crop-destroying pests, seem to see more of them than most people do. But it is hard to see just what the spirit of the country has to do with the 'roo, though stamps, tourist posters, government emblems, trade marks, and all kinds of latter-day commercial devices have tried to make that ungainly marsupial Australia's patron saint.

You might find the true spirit of the country—or at least you could have done so until the mass influx of post-war migrants and the streamlining of rural work al-

tered matters a little—in a most unlikely place, in a wizened, sinewy, gnarled person—the slow-moving itinerant rural worker, who carries his swag (rolled-up blankets) on his back, the famous Australian swagman. He is the hero of “Waltzing Matilda”, of hundreds of folksy ballads and of bush lore, and of all the qualities that even the most urbanized Australian would like to boast.

I remember that ten years ago I could find this unique repository of Australian folk-wisdom by going only a few miles outside of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, or Perth. There beside a main-travelled road the wrinkled, sunburnt figure would recline on his swag and stare impassively at passers-by, or push a weather-beaten hat over his knotty features to enjoy a few hours of (often alcoholic) sleep before wandering on in search of work. But two years ago, I could not even find him near Canberra—and Canberra, Australia’s tiny federal capital situated some hundred and fifty miles in the interior, is still a moderately genuine bush-village despite the artificial imposition of foreign embassies, government offices, as well as colleges and movie theatres (two of each) on the wild grandeur of its natural beauty.

But though the swagman may be vanishing, and to trace him you might have to travel a few hundred miles into the bush, his soul shows as much persistence as John Brown’s. If anything, the peculiar outlook on life attributed to him has recently received a considerable build-up at the hands of writers and historians because the post-war challenge to Australia’s way of life (every ninth Australian is a post-war migrant) has created a demand for native folk-heroes and folkways.

The swagman’s outstanding quality is irreverence. He has little respect for anything and no respect for anybody. For a century now he has watched with wry amusement the passing parade of English aristocrats, Scottish settlers, government officials, visitors, immigrants, and other miscellaneous city-bred folk make fools of themselves in the inhospitable Australian bush. His cynicism and stoicism are legendary, as is his indifference towards law and prosperity, and, presumably, towards work. A friend of mine, who is an authority on Australian ballads, told me that he once encountered one of these typical swagmen (or “sundowners”, as isolated bush-workers are sometimes called) in the heart of the Australian desert near Alice Springs. My ballad-collector became enthusiastic over the magnificent landscape, truly one of the grandest panoramas on earth, its plains and hills being bathed in the purple radiance of the desert sunset . . . when the sundowner, casting a cursory glance in the general direction indicated, snubbed my friend with what he still considers the most typical Australian sentiment he has ever heard expressed. Said the sundowner casually “Yes, I s’pose the old bloke didn’t do a bad job here,” and continued staring at the ground in unmoved silence.

It was this story which came to my mind when the hitch-hiker thanked me for having driven him in to the city by calling me a strike-breaker. The Australian worker has taken over the bushman's superciliousness towards anybody who does not earn his living with his hands, a sentiment which never fails to horrify English visitors (as readers of D. H. Lawrence's novel *Kangaroo* might remember). Furthermore, he has imported into the cities the bushworkers' fierce loyalty towards one another. In the bush in the old days, one's working companion or mate was as important as food and drink; mutual dependence ensured survival in the wilderness. Also, the knowledge that you could trust your mates made it safe to harass sheep ranchers with strike threats and strikes, so that the sheep-shearers, for example, managed to gain the excellent working conditions and wages which demonstrated that solidarity had cash value as well as emotional appeal. And so mateship, once the gospel of the bush, today wears the face of militant unionism.

While here and there the swagman and sundowner still tramp the silent bush, alone or with a mate, the urban worker (like the kangaroo) moves with the group to which he belongs. He instinctively thinks of mankind as divided into classes and will forgive a man anything, including a difference in race or religion, if that man is a labourer and therefore a victim of wages, hours, and bosses, grazing on the same pasture as he himself. Some of these attitudes are stamped over the Australian community generally, and if you want to tell an Australian from any other national, listen for the voice of the bush. Provided he is not talking about his favourite football team, there will always be an undertone of concern for fairness and justice, of solidarity with the underdog and the out-of-luck, and of the casual toleration of all except those who think themselves superior to him. A poet once summed it all up. He was Henry Lawson, once Australia's most popular poet, a bellicose genius of Scandinavian origin, who died about thirty years ago from drinking too much. Cried Lawson:

They tramp in mateship side by side  
 The Protestant and Roman  
 They call no biped lord or sir  
 And touch their hat to no man!

But to mention Lawson is to mention the past. In his lifetime critics could say of him that "he weeps as Australians of the bush weep, with dry eyes and a hard curving of the mouth." Today, interest in him tends to be scholarly, a sure sign that his message, and with it many of those to whom it was addressed, have become respectable. The Australian can still be angry, but he cannot weep any more.

High standards of living, the desire to create Australian material life in the American image—"Austerica" is the current name for it—and other treacherous concessions to middle-class ideals, make concern for social justice difficult. Even Protestant and Roman no longer walk side by side; the Australian Labour Party is mortally split into a Catholic and a non-Catholic section, and what little concession that party has ever made to the ideals of mateship is virtually absent today. "Labour must always be fairly starry-eyed," writes the *Nation*, a brand-new Sydney journal. "When it, of all parties, loses a sense of idealism and truth to itself, the results are dangerous for the country. They are dangerous now." This warning may be too early. The tradition of the bush, its mateship and its proud resignation, still haunt the imagination of the leaders. Militant unionism and strikes still require their myths to give them ethical justification. But who can say for how long? Will the union ticket go the way of the kangaroo?