Going for a Song: The Cultural Politics of "Waltzing Matilda"

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Abstract
An examination of the copyright history of Australia’s unofficial national anthem, ‘Waltzing Matilda’, provides an insight into the political, economic and cultural relations between Britain, the United States of America and Australia. In particular, the extent to which Australia’s cultural industries are a surrogate or proxy for the larger interests of global powers is demonstrated. It is argued that this surrogacy has, and continues to have, a potentially constricting effect on the circulation of matters of cultural concern through the Australian national community.

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"Waltzing Matilda" is Australia's best-known bush ballad, and has been described as the country's "unofficial national anthem". The title was Australian slang for travelling on foot (waltzing) with one's belongings in a "matilda" (swag) slung over one's back. The song narrates the story of an itinerant worker, or "swagman", making a drink of billy tea at a bush camp and capturing a stray jumbuck (ram) to eat. When the jumbuck's owner, a squatter (landowner), and three mounted policemen pursue the Waltzing Matilda is an important song for the people of Australia. So much so, in fact, that it is not at all uncommon to hear it referred to as the 'unofficial anthem' of the country - and, one that many may actually prefer to Australia's actual anthem, Advance Australia Fair. It is, perhaps, the most recognizable representation of a particular point in Australian history - that point when the country was still largely 'untamed', when bush-rangers were as infamous as the outlaws of the American wild west, and when drifters could make a living moving from place to place.