This section is to familiarize students with our best-known works of literature and songs of Australiana. Having children study these poems, ballads and ditties will help our unique culture and history to live on into future generations.

Some pieces are not presented here in their entirety. This is for two reasons: (1) the full work may be very long (2) one or more verses may not be easily comprehended by children.

Offering excerpts or selected verses only, ensures greater degrees of familiarity and understanding.

The poems and songs that have come from people’s experiences of living and surviving in the Australian bush were often written by ordinary, everyday people and are a record of the colourful language of bush life.

The convict songs of the early days of the Australian colonies became the foundation of Australia’s bush music. Bush ballads recorded the harsh way of life and descriptions of contemporary events. They provide an accurate record of the lives and loves of bushrangers, swagmen, drovers, and shearers.

**How to Treat the Selected Works**

- Print the poem/song and distribute copies to students.
- Present some background information about the work and/or the author (see notes that precede the work).
- Students read through the piece by themselves. This to be followed by a teacher-class discussion, verse by verse, wherein the meanings of key words or phrases are explained. The requirements of some questions may also need to be clarified.
- In answering the questions students should be encouraged to use their own words (unless asked otherwise).

The notes preceding each work will provide teachers and their students with some background to each of the twenty-one works and their creators.

**Waltzing Matilda** *A.B (Banjo) Paterson*

*Waltzing Matilda* was inspired by the death of a swagman-shearer during the shearers’ strikes of the 1890s.

The song is supposed to have been based on an actual incident which happened during a depression during 1895 when work was scarce, and revolves around a swagman who is looking for work. The swagman is so-called because he carries his swag on his back.
A swagman sets up camp for the night near a billabong, under the shade of a coolibah tree and puts his billy on to boil water over a camp fire to make tea to drink. A jumbuck comes down to drink from the billabong, and the hungry swagman catches the sheep, intending to eat it for dinner. The swagman shoves the sheep into his tucker-bag to restrain it and stop it from running away. However the squatter has witnessed what has happened and brings three troopers with him to arrest the swagman. The troopers tell the swagman that they are there to arrest him for stealing the sheep, and that he has to ‘come with them to the jail’. The swagman, who is well aware that the penalty for sheep stealing is execution by hanging, then dives into the billabong to swim away and escape arrest. However the swagman is not a strong swimmer and he drowns.

**Glossary**

*Waltzing Matilda:* to carry one's swag from camp to camp  
*swagman:* an itinerant farmhand, carrying his “swag” (his blankets) rolled into a cylinder  
*billabong:* a creek (normally with a pronounced “oxbow” bend)  
*coolibah tree:* a eucalypt (gum) tree  
*billy:* a tin can used to heat water over a campfire to make tea  
*jumbuck:* sheep  
*tucker-bag:* bag or box used to store food  
*squatter:* farmer/grazier who found good land and took possession; some became extremely rich  
*trooper:* policeman or soldier on horseback
Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong,
Under the shade of a coolibah tree,
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled,
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

Chorus
“Waltzing Matilda, Waltzing Matilda,
Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?”
And he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled,
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

Down came a jumbuck to drink at the billabong,
Up jumped the swagman and grabbed him with glee,
And he sang as he shoved that jumbuck in his tucker-bag,
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

Chorus
(3rd line is now: And he sang as he shoved that jumbuck in his tucker-bag)

Up rode a squatter, mounted on his thoroughbred,
Down came the troopers, one, two, three:
“Who’s that jolly jumbuck you’ve got in your tucker-bag?
You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me!”

Chorus
(3rd line is now: “Who’s that jolly jumbuck you’ve got in your tucker-bag?”)

Up jumped the swagman and sprang into the billabong,
“You’ll never catch me alive!” said he;
And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong,
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me!”

Chorus
(3rd line is now....And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong)

Questions
1. What is a swagman?

2. Why is a billabong a good place to camp at?

3. How did swagmen boil their billy?

4. What does ‘grabbed him with glee’ mean?

5. What kinds of food do you think the swagman might have in his tucker bag?

6. How did the squatter arrive at the scene?

7. How do we know that the troopers arrived from a different direction than did the squatter.

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8. What action of the swagman shows us that he was afraid of going to jail?

9. What do you think was the cause of the swagman's death?

My Country Dorothea Mackellar

Isobel Marion Dorothea Mackellar (1885-1968) was a poet and fiction writer. Her poetry is usually regarded as bush poetry, inspired as it is by her experience on her brothers’ farms near Gunnedah, New South Wales.

Her best-known poem is My Country written at age 19 while homesick in England, and first published in the London Spectator in 1908 under the title Core of My Heart. Four volumes of her collected verse were published: The Closed Door, published in 1911, and containing the first appearance of My Country under its present name; The Witchmaid (1914); Dreamharbour (1923); and Fancy Dress (1926).

In 1984 Gunnedah resident Mikie Maas created the “Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards”, which has grown into a nationwide poetry competition for Australian school students.

Dorothea Mackellar was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for her contribution to Australian literature in 1968, two weeks before her death. A memorial to Mackellar stands in ANZAC Park in Gunnedah. A federal electorate covering half of Sydney’s Northern Beaches and a Canberra suburb are named in her honour.
I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains;
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror-
The wide brown land for me!

Core of my heart, my country!
Land of the Rainbow Gold,
For flood and fire and famine
She pays us back threefold,
Over the thirsty paddocks,
Watch after many days,
The filmy veil of greenness
That thickens as we gaze.

An opal-hearted country,
A wilful lavish land-
All you who have not loved her,
You will not understand-
Though earth holds many splendours
Wherever I may die,
I know to what brown country,
My homing thoughts will fly.

Questions
1. Why do you think Dorothea McKellar calls Australia a ‘sunburnt country’?

2. Australia is a land of contrasts. Give two examples from the first verse.

3. What does the first verse tell about Australia?

4. To what might ‘terror’ refer? (line 7)

5. What is meant by ‘core of my heart’?

6. What do you think ‘pays us back threefold’ means’?

7. What turns into a ‘filmy veil of greenness’?
8. Dorothea McKellar is aware that Australia is not the only beautiful place in the world. Write the line in the last verse that tells us that.

9. What would you say ‘homing thoughts’ are?

Along the Road to Gundagai  Jack O’Hagan

“Along the Road to Gundagai” is considered an Australian folk tune. The first line of the chorus is instantly recognisable, due to its use of rhyme and repetition.

Gundagai is a charming historic township on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River in New South Wales. The town is forever associated with the dog on the tuckerbox in Australian folklore. Perhaps more than any other Australian town Gundagai has proved an irresistible subject with writers of popular verse. This probably relates to the fact that Five Mile Creek, to the north of town, was a popular meeting place with teamsters, drovers, shearers and bush travellers. ‘Lazy Harry’ and ‘Flash Jack from Gundagai’ are anonymous poems relating to the town.

Jack O’Hagan, who had never been to Gundagai, wrote “Along the Road to Gundagai”, a nostalgic and highly sentimental song, in 1922. It became an international success and the signature tune for the popular radio show ‘Dad and Dave’. O’Hagan later wrote “Where the Dog Sits on the Tucker-box” and “When a Boy from Alabama Meets a Girl from Gundagai”. The hero of Henry Lawson’s “Scots of the Riverina” has a farm ‘by Gundagai’ while C.J. Dennis mentions the town in “The Traveller”.

The bush was a favourite subject of Australian songs, although it was often portrayed as a place people had left and longed to return to.
There’s a track winding back
To an old-fashioned shack,
Along the road to Gundagai;
Where the blue gums are growing
And the Murrumbidgee’s flowing,
Beneath that sunny sky;
Where my Daddy and Mummy are waiting for me
And the pals of my childhood once more I will see;
Then no more will I roam
When I’m heading straight for home,
Along the road to Gundagai.

Activity:
Using ideas from the song write an acrostic poem.

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