

# PLOD ESSAY: The Piano by Frank Coldebella

A CLEARING sale is a pivotal event, where neighbours, friends, kids, collectors and bargain hunters gather, and the local hall committee makes the lunches and teas.

This farm in the Krowera hills had been in the same family since 1878, when two brothers from Scotland walked up from the port of Grantville with camping supplies, a box of axe heads and a lot of determination. Doing their bit to clear and improve the narrow track as they went, they would have noticed the hills were alive with a thousand bush songs: the dawn chorus of birds, leaves shivering in the wind, the hiss of a waterfall after a downpour, healing twilight calls echoing in the gullies ...

On sale now were old farm tools and equipment from a time when milking 55 cows was enough to raise a robust family.

As eager bidders formed a huddle around a box of assorted sundries and the agent started his repetitive sales pitch, I noticed an old piano with bent candleholders under an ancient oak tree. It must have been the centre of celebration when it arrived at the old homestead. For decades, though, it had accumulated dust in a shed, the only notes played by rodents. Now it stood silent, its fate undecided.

I wondered how many balls, parties, Friday night gatherings, dances, welcome homes and send-offs had been celebrated around this piano. Perhaps it was played at concerts at a one-teacher 10-children primary school. When it arrived on that Krowera farm the pioneers must have felt a sense of accomplishment. Maybe the same tunes that had been played on the wharf at their departure from the old world were played again, and they were transported back to the time when they were young.

Did someone play The Blue Alsatian Mountains at Danish weddings as the Petersons, Andersons, Hansens, Olsens, Mollers and Steenholdts spread from their camp at Poowong East all over Gippsland?

In or out of tune, did it do its duty at bush soldiers' send-offs to far-distant wars? Was it there, amid the arches festooned with gum tips



mixed with the fragrance of Saturday baking, when the weary soldiers returned? Did it help to mend hearts broken by the chaos of war?

Did it provide a fleeting moment of perfection to some lonely drover's wife surrounded by toil and longing?

In 1775 a colliery owner wrote, "I cannot yet reconcile myself to seeing my fellow creatures descend into the dark regions of the earth; though to my great comfort I hear them singing in the pits."

Singing goes deep. It can reconcile minds and touch hearts, without the potential for misunderstanding of the spoken word. Amid the death and destruction of the First World War, German and English soldiers heard the heart-felt singing of the enemy and realised they could not be the evil savages they had been told.

Sir Howard Kingsley Wood, a major in the trenches in 1914, recalled the occasion during a House of Commons debate in 1930: "If we had been left to ourselves, there would not have been another shot fired. It is only that we were being controlled by others that made it necessary to start shooting one another again."

When I was a teenager, groups of seniors would gather around a piano in the ladies' lounge of the Powlett Hotel to sing the songs that made them feel like teenagers. For one old lady in a wheelchair, the piano was her transport to pleasures past, her glistening eyes staring into another time and place. Only her fingers and toes were able to repeat the moves

around a long-past, joy-filled dance floor.

Despite the headlines of the local press, which in July 1925 warned of an “influx of Italians” to Wonthaggi, two Drane sisters from county Durham married two Italians not long after. They shared a love of folk songs, songs that make us both happy and sad, that balance our hearts, heads and appetites.

Scots and Italians had a shared outlook. Both had come from remote villages where heartfelt singing was the main cultural fare, showing off to those across the way like birds in a forest and finding the line of least resistance between the hearts of hard men. Their loyalties were to the village, not to London or Rome.

By the mid-1950s the Chambers family in South Wonthaggi were surrounded on all sides by former “enemy aliens”. Joe taught English night classes to newly arrived Italians. As the lessons progressed, singing took up more of the evenings. Accents from Belluno to Sicily harmonised with Scottish accents. The song “Speed Bonnie Boat” expressed their shared migrant hopes. The Scottish “bonnie” and Italian “*bouni*” mean the same. To those newly arrived from Italy, “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” always sounded like *Viva Tony Martello*.

Everyone could relate to old folk tunes and words:

“I sing not here of warriors bold  
Of battles lost or victories won.  
I sing the miner’s plagues and cares  
Their labours hard and lowly lot  
Their homely joys and humble fares.”

Gathering for group singing led to other neighbourhood projects, including the McMahon Reserve. Bravo, *Bravissimo*, Joe!

My grandfather worked on farms in the Krowera/Jeetho area in the 1920s. Did he and the Scots in the hills gather round this piano and sing “Wild Mountain Thyme”? Did my grandfather contribute “Hear Thou My

Weeping Heart” or *Quel mazzolin di fiori*?

During the Second World War, Italian prisoners of war worked on farms around South Gippsland. Their melancholy folk songs, infused with loneliness and loss, would have hummed in the hills and valleys as they toiled. Maybe this piano’s notes nourished their yearning hearts with *Dove sei stato mio bell’alpino*.

Before the transistor radio, I can remember men whistling or singing to themselves while they worked. In the mid-60s, when the working day reached the right time, Italian pea-pickers in the hills around Wonthaggi would sing call and response tunes in the style of African slaves in America.

By now an eager crowd was flowing around me towards the next auction lot. I asked about the piano’s new owner but there was none. “Passed in, mate, not a bid.”

When the last lot numbers had been sung, the hall ladies packed up and the serenity of the late afternoon hill country returned. The piano waited with other rejects: a heavy hand-made wooden trailer and a rusted metal trunk.

With the help of a puzzled mate I pushed it back into the shed where it stays. Although it can scarcely raise a note, it still sings to me of other days.



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