Wild Colonial Boy

Thomas Cleghorn

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/songstorysamplercollection

Part of the Ethnomusicology Commons, Folklore Commons, and the Oral History Commons

Recommended Citation
Cleghorn, Thomas. 1964. "Wild Colonial Boy." NA64.6, CD72.7. Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, Raymond H. Fogler Special Collections Department, University of Maine.

This Song is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine Song and Story Sampler by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.
“Wild Colonial Boy” is one of a few songs that came to Maine from Australia by way of Britain. This particular version was collected in Canada, but the singer learned it in the Maine woods, a point that underscores the close connections of Maine and the Maritimes economically and culturally. The basic story told in the song is of a young man from Ireland who goes to Australia — most versions of the song imply he was transported there as a criminal — who goes on to become a sort of Robin Hood figure, robbing from the rich and destroying their farms then helping the poor. At the end of the song he is surrounded by the authorities and given a chance to surrender, but he opts instead to meet death in a blaze of glory. Beyond its Australian origins in the late nineteenth century, scholars disagree over some of the details behind the story. Some argue that “Wild Colonial Boy” was one of many localized derivations of the ballad “Bold Jack Donahue,” a song that heroized a notorious highwayman and bushranger (an Australian term for an escaped convict living in the wilderness) and became so popular it was banned. Others, however, contend that the two songs emerged concurrently and “Wild Colonial Boy” was based on Jack Dowling, another real cattle rustler and bushranger, who is named specifically in the song.

Whomever the song was based on, it became a very popular song throughout Maine, the Maritime Provinces, and lumbercamps well beyond that range. There are different localized versions collected in Vermont, the Catskills, and as far away as Montana. This recording of Thomas Cleghorn shows the version particular to the Northeastern United States and Maritimes. Instead of the hero Jack Dowling coming from Castlemaine, Ireland, which is the more common place of origin, he is from the city Calais, Maine. (The version from Vermont lists Casco, Maine, and the version from the Catskills even names his birthplace as “Pennsylvane”.) Beyond the local tradition, the song has appeared many times on folk and popular commercial recordings, which certainly helps to account for the fact that it is almost always sung to some version of the same tune. As a final point of interest, Mr. Cleghorn claimed to have learned this song from none other than the great woodsman-songmaker Joe Scott.

1. It's of a wild colonial boy, Jack Dowling was his name;
   His parents they were wealthy, brought up in Calais, Maine.
   He was his father's only hope and his mother's only joy –
   A terror to Australia was the wild colonial boy.

2. At the early age of sweet sixteen he began his wild career;
   His heart it knew no danger, nor a stranger did he fear.
   He held up stage and mail coach and he robbed Lord MacElroy –
A terror to Australia was the wild colonial boy.

3. He wrote the judge a warning and he told him to beware, 
Never to so strike a eager blow while marching on the square, 
Never deprive a mother of her hope, her only joy, 
Nor send them out there rambling like the wild colonial boy.

4. Jack said unto his comrades as they climbed the mountains high, 
Together we will ramble and together we will die. 
We’ll rob those wealthy farmers and their flocks we shall destroy, 
With trembling hands give o’er their gold to the wild colonial boy.”

5. Then Jack rode out one evening, as he gaily rode along, 
A-listening to the mocking birds set forth their cheerful song, 
Three mounted troopers came riding up, Keldavis, and Malloy – 
They all set out to capture the wild colonial boy.

6. “Surrender now, Jack Dowling! For you been a plundering sin. 
Surrender now in the Queen’s name for here is three to one.” 
Jack pulled a pistol from his belt, it was no playful toy: 
“I’ll fight but not surrender!” cries the wild colonial boy.

7. He fired at Fitzgerald, and he brought him to the ground, 
Turned to Keldavis, gave him his deathly wound. 
When a bullet sharp did pierce his heart from the rifle of Malloy, 
They shot him and they captured the wild colonial boy.