

Podcast 107 - The Australian National Anthem

by Rob McCormack - Saturday, December 15, 2018

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Podcast Number 107 – The Australian National Anthem

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Hi,

The Australian National Anthem is heard in Australia at important ceremonial occasions or at major sporting events. In this podcast, I would like to tell you a little about our national anthem ‘Advance Australia Fair’.

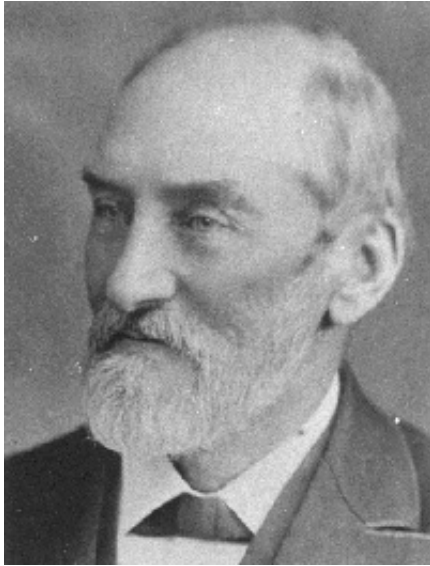
Up until 1974, the British national anthem ‘God Save the Queen’ was Australia’s national anthem. The British queen is the head of government in Australia and our history as a colony of Britain made it seem natural that we should have the same national anthem as the British. Over the years, there has always been interest in other national songs in Australia and there have been several competitions since the early 1800s to find a song which could be used as our national song. The songs which became the most popular were the ‘Song of Australia’ written in 1856, ‘Waltzing Matilda’ (see Podcast [86](#)) written in 1895, and ‘Advance Australia Fair’ which was written in 1878. Indeed, in 1951, for the 50th anniversary of Australia’s federation in 1901, it was decided once again to hold a competition for the writing of a new national anthem for Australia. However, no decision was made by the government on changing the national anthem.

In 1972 a new federal government lead by Gough Whitlam came to power in Australia. It was a Labor Party government whose members and supporters were strongly in favour of Australia being more independent from Britain. Having a new Australian National Anthem was an example of that. The

Whitlam government conducted a survey of 60,000 Australians in 1974, asking them to choose a new national anthem from among the 3 most popular national songs. 51.4% of those surveyed chose 'Advance Australia Fair'. As a result, in 1974 the Whitlam government announced that Australia's new national anthem would be 'Advance Australia Fair'. Finally a decision had been made. However, in 1975 the Whitlam government was defeated in a general election and a Coalition government was elected, led by Malcolm Fraser. It reversed the decision which the Whitlam government had made, once more making 'God Save the Queen' Australia's national anthem. However, the new government recognized that many Australians wanted a new national anthem. Plans were made to put a plebiscite to the Australian people. Fortunately, in 1977 there was to be a referendum so that the Australian people could decide whether certain changes should be made to our constitution. This seemed like a good time to also ask all Australians about which national song should become our national anthem. The question about the national anthem was optional, meaning that Australians only answered this question if they wanted to. Four songs were presented and Australians were asked to say which song they wanted as their national anthem. The options were the existing national anthem 'God Save the Queen', 'Waltzing Matilda', 'Advance Australia Fair' and 'Song of Australia'. 'Advance Australia Fair' was easily the winner, selected by 43.29% of the voters. 'Waltzing Matilda' was second with 28.28%, 'God Save the Queen' received 18.78% and 'Song of Australia' received 9.65%.

I can remember voting in this plebiscite. I remember thinking at the time that, while 'Waltzing Matilda' is a much loved Australian song, the lyrics are not really suitable as a national song. Let's face it. A story about a sheep stealer who is caught by the police and then drowns himself by jumping into a billabong is a pretty strange sort of national anthem. The words of 'Advance Australia Fair' seemed much more appropriate. That was my feeling at the time, back in 1977, and almost half of Australians agreed with me. 'God Save the Queen' was never really a suitable national anthem for Australia as far as I was concerned, as it belonged to another country – Great Britain.

The government finally made the change to our national anthem 7 years later in 1984 – the wheels of government move slowly sometimes. Since then, our national anthem has been, and remains, 'Advance Australia Fair'. If a member of the royal family is attending an event in Australia, then 'God Save the Queen' is also played, along with 'Advance Australia Fair'.



Peter Dodds McCormick

The composer of the words and music for Advance Australia Fair.

The words and tune were written by Peter Dodds McCormick, a Scottish born school teacher who lived and taught in Sydney. He wrote the song in 1878 and the song was first performed at a concert in that same year. The song became quite popular and was sung by a choir of 10,000 people at the inauguration ceremony for Australia's federation in 1901.

The lyrics are patriotic statements about Australia and Australians. Keep in mind they were written in 1878, so perhaps there are a few words which seem a little unfamiliar or outdated for our modern Australian English. Nonetheless, most Australians know at least the words from the first verse. I know I do. Here's how the song goes.

Australians all let us rejoice.
For we are young and free;
We've golden soil and wealth for toil;
Our home is girt by sea;
Our land abounds in nature's gifts
Of beauty rich and rare;
In history's page let every stage
Advance Australia Fair.
In joyful strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

Beneath our radiant Southern Cross.
We'll toil with hearts and hands;
To make this Commonwealth of ours
Renowned of all the lands;
For those who've come across the seas
We've boundless plains to share;
With courage let us all combine
To Advance Australia Fair.
In joyful strains then let us sing,
Advance Australia Fair.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCQLmteikdM>

If you have a question or a comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

[WpProQuiz 109]

Vocabulary

abounds = where you have lots of something

advance = to move forward, to improve your position

agreed = (here) when two or more people believe the same thing

anniversary = the date once a year when you remember something special. For example, a birthday

announced = made public, when others are told

anthem = a song which represents a country

appropriate = (here) when something fits

as far as I was concerned = from my point of view

attending = when a person goes to an event

belonged = owned by

billabong = a small lake on the bend of a river in Australia

boundless = when something goes on forever

ceremonial occasions = special events which have a formal set of steps, often a tradition. For example, Australia Day ceremony, citizenship ceremony

choir = a large group of people who sing together

Coalition = a political party made up of 2 or more smaller political parties

colony = an area that is controlled by a foreign country (in this case, Great Britain)

combine = join together

competitions = when teams or people try to win in a game, sport or test of skill

conducted = to do

constitution = a document which describes how a country will work

defeated = beaten, when you have lost a battle, fight or contest

drowns = to die under water

elected = people chosen in an election to be politicians

existing = when something is already there

federal government = the highest level of government in Australia

federation = when several groups or organisations join together

general election = when people of a country vote for a new government

girt = around the edges, encircled, surrounded

Gough Whitlam = the name of the Prime Minister of Australia 1972 to 1975

in favour = when you agree

inauguration = the start of something, usually something large and important

independent = when you can decide yourself, without being told by others

interest = (here) when people want to know more

keep in mind = remember

lyrics = the words in a song

members = people who belong to a group

natural = (here) normal, expected

nonetheless = despite this, even though

optional = not compulsory, which means you don't have to do something if you don't want to

options = the choices between which you must choose

outdated = when something is old and not used any more

over the years = for a long period of time, many years

patriotic statements = words about the love of your country and its people

plains = flat areas of land

plebiscite = when the people of a country are asked a question. Voting is optional

radiant = bright

received = got, given

recognized = when you can see or understand that something is true

referendum = when the people of a country are asked a question. Voting is compulsory

renowned = well known

reversed = turned back, changed to the other direction

several = usually more than 2 and less than 10

stealer = someone who takes something that is not their own

strains = when you sing

suitable = when something fits

supporters = people who like a person or group and who try to help it

survey = when you ask a group of people what they think of something

taught = was teaching

toil = work

unfamiliar = when you have not heard or seen something before

wheels of government = an expression meaning how a government works

written = when something is put down on paper with a pen or pencil