Ten miles down Reedy River a pool of water lies,
And all the year it mirrors the changes in the skies.
Within that pool's broad bosom is room for all the stars;
Its bed of sand has drifted o'er countless rocky bars.

Beneath the granite ridges the eye may just discern
Where Rocky Creek emerges from deep green banks of fern;
And standing tall between them, the grassy sheoaks cool
The hard, blue-tinted waters before they reach the pool.

Then home along the river that night we rode a race,
And the moonlight lent a glory to Mary Campbell's face;
I pleaded for my future all through that moonlight ride,
Until our weary horses drew closer side by side.

Ten miles from Ryan's crossing and five below the peak,
I built a little homestead on the banks of Rocky Creek;
I cleared the land and fenced it and ploughed the rich red loam,
And my first crop was golden when I brought Mary home.

Now still down Reedy River the grassy sheoaks sigh,
The waterholes still mirror the pictures in the sky;
The golden sand is drifting across the rocky bars;
And o'er all for ever go sun and moon and stars.

But of the hut I builded there are no traces now,
And many rains have levelled the furrows of my plough;
Their wattle-blossom golden above my Mary's grave.

Poem Henry Lawson
Music Chris Kempster

Reedy River
Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod

Poem Dorothy Hewett
Music Chris Kempster

Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod
Walked by the wurleys when the wind was loud.
And their voice was new as the fresh sap running.
And we keep on fighting and we keep on coming.

Don McLeod beat at a mulga bush
And a lot of queer things came out in a rush.
Like mongrel dogs with their flattened tail
They sneaked him off to the Hedland jail.

In the big black jail where the moonlight fell
Clancy and Dooley sat in the cell.
In the big white court crammed full with hate
They said, “We wouldn’t scab on a mate.”

In the great hot quiet they said it loud
And smiled in the eyes of Don McLeod,
And the working-men all over the land
Heard what they shouted and shook their hand.

The sheep’s wool dragged and the squatters swore
And talked nice words till their tongues got sore
And their bellies swelled with so much lies
But the blackfellers shoved them off like flies.

The sheep got lost on the squatters’ run
The shearing season was nearly done.
Said the squatters eaten up with greed.
“We’ll pay good wages and give good feed.”

The blackfellers sheared the wool and then
Got their wages like working-men.
The squatters’ words were stiff and sore,
“We won’t pay wages like that no more.”

The white boss said – STAY OUT OF TOWN.
And they ground with their boots to keep us down.
“We’ll starve them out until they crawl
Back on their bellies, we’ll starve ‘em all.”

The sun was blood on the bare sheep-runs,
The women whispered, “They’ll come with guns.”
But we marched to our camp, and our step was proud,
And we sat down there and laughed out loud.

[On May Day, 1946, in the Pilbara District in the North West of Western Australia, 800 Aboriginal station hands struck for 30 bob a week and the right to organise. Their leaders, the white man Don McLeod, and two Aborigines, Clancy McKenna and Dooley, were arrested and convicted. But pressure through the Labour Movement and the United Nations brought their release. The Aborigines formed their own co-operative which endures to this day (e.g. See Donald Stuart’s novel, “Yandy.”).]
On the night train

Poem Henry Lawson
Music Chris Kempster

Have you seen the bush by moonlight, from the train, go running by?
Blackened log and stump and sapling, ghostly trees at dead and dry;
Here a patch of glassy water; there a glimpse of mystic sky?
Have you heard the still voice calling - yet so warm, and yet so cold:
"I'm the Mother-Bush that bore you! Come to me when you are old!"

Did you see the Bush below you sweeping darkly to the Range,
All unchanged and all unchanging, yet so very old and strange?
While you thought in softened anger of the things that did estrange?
(Did you hear the Bush a-calling, when your heart was young and bold:
"I'm the Mother-Bush that nursed you; come to me when you are old!"

In the cutting, in the tunnel, out of sight of stack or shed,
Have you heard the grey Bush calling from the pine-ridge overhead:
"You have seen the seas and cities; all is cold to you, or dead
All seems done and all seems told - but the grey-light turns to gold!
I'm the Mother-Bush that loves you; come to me now you are old!"

Nursery rhyme

Poem Frank Wilmot
Music Chris Kempster

One year, two year, three year, four,
Comes a khaki gentleman knocking at the door.
"Any little boys at home, send them out to me
To train them and brain them in battles yet to be."

When a little boy is born feed him, train him so.
Put him in a cattle pen and wait for him to grow.
When he's nice and plump and dear, and sensible and sweet,
Toss him in the cannon's mouth, cannons fancy best
Tender little boys' flesh that's easy to digest.

Mother rears her family on two pounds ten a week.
Teaches them to wash themselves, teaches them to speak.
Rears them with a heart's love, rears them to be men.
Grinds her fingers to the bone, and then... what then?

But parents who must rear the boys the cannons love to slay,
Also pay for cannons that blow other boys away.
Parsons tell them that their sons have just been blown to bits.
Patriotic parents must all laugh like fits.

Rear the boys for honest men and send them out to die!
Where's the coward father who would dare raise a cry?
Any gentleman's aware folk rear their children for
Blunderers and plunderers to mangle in a war!

Five year, six year, seven year, eight,
"Hurry up you little chaps, the captain's at the gate!"

In 1916 during the First World War a poet named Frank Wilmot (who wrote under the name Furnley Maurice) turned his revulsion at the conscription of young people into this poem.

It was set to music in the mid 1950s by Chris Kempster, and when he sang it at a folk session thirty years later, this led to Miguel Heatwole writing an arrangement of it for the Solidarity Choir, this version is on the choir's CD “Ten Years Strong”.

 Poem Frank Wilmot
Music Chris Kempster
Cane killed Abel

Words Merv Lilley
Music Chris Kempster

I was a cane cutter, but now I’m at sea,
Stool it and top it and load it up high.
Once cane killed Abel, but it won’t kill me,
Cut cane in the wet, cut cane in the dry.

There was an old seaman who sang this refrain,
Stool it and top it and load it up high.
He stood to the bar and he filled up again,
Cut cane in the wet, cut cane in the dry.

I rose every morning about half past three,
Stool it and top it and load it up high.
To cook me my breakfast, my dinner and tea.
Cut cane in the wet, cut cane in the dry.

I worked very hard until I went to sea,
Stool it and top it and load it up high.
Once cane killed Abel, and it almost killed me.
Cut cane in the wet, cut cane in the dry.

I was a cane cutter, but now I’m at sea,
Stool it and top it and load it up high.
Once cane killed Abel, but it won’t kill me.
Cut cane in the wet, cut cane in the dry.

Rain in the mountains

Words Merv Lilley
Music Chris Kempster

The valley’s full of misty cloud, its tinted beauty drowning,
The Eucalypti roar aloud, the mountain fronts are frowning.

But love, the rain will pass full soon, far sooner than my sorrow,
And in a golden afternoon the sun may set to-morrow.

Published in 1962 this book was an inspiration to singers like Bill Berry, Mike Leyden and Chris Kempster.
O cock of the morning
With a dream in his hand,
My love has come home
To the wonderful land.

He bursts through the door,
With his eyes like the sun,
And his kitbag crammed full
Of the treasures he’s won.

There’s pearl shell from Broome,
And a tall Darwin tale,
And coral and clam,
And the jaws of a whale.

And my kitchen is full
Of the smell of the sea,
And the leaping green fishes
My love brings to me.

O tumble your treasures
From Darwin to Broome,
And fill with your glory
This straight little room.

With the sun in the morning
Ablaze on his chest
My love has come home
From the North of Nor’West.
 Equal pay song

Words by Denis Kevans
Music by Chris Kempster

Chorus
The wage is fixed by arbitration
Greatest intellects of the nation.
All for one but none for all,
That is the gospel industrial.

In the good old day the darling dear,
Have only to plough and to fence and shear.
There never was any other way,
The man's affection her pay.

But today is a changing pattern,
Women no longer is a kitchen scullery,
She is able to earn a wage,
Get her photo in the fashion page.

So in between her attempts to mate us
She sometimes achieves the professional status,
But the smartest of the weaker sex,
Are eating of a different wage index.

If some of the seniority,
Were given the appropriate salary,
A new disease would come to blight us-
Flabbergaster-enteritis.

You bet on the GGs and the lottery,
But you are barking up the wrong money tree,
Get behind your Union Organisers,
Try for the big industrial prizes.

My love-burst came, like an English Spring, in days when our hair was brown
And the hem of her skirt was a sacred thing and her hair was an angel's crown;
The shock when another man touched her arm, where the dancers sat in a row;
The hope, the despair, and the false alarm - do you think that I do not know?

By the arbours lights on the western farms, you remember the question put,
While you held her warm in your quivering arms and you trembled from head to foot;
The electric shock from her finger-tips, and the murmuring answer low
The soft, shy yielding of warm red lips - do you think that I do not know?

She was buried at Brighton, where Gordon sleeps, when I was a world away;
And the sad old garden its secret keeps, for nobody knows to-day.
She left a message for me to read, where the wild wide oceans flow;
Do you know how the heart of a man can bleed - do you think that I do not know?

I stood by the grave where the dead girl lies, when the sunlit scenes were fair,
'Neath white clouds high in the autumn skies, and I answered the message there.
But the haunting words of the dead to me shall go wherever I go.
She lives in the Marriage that Might Have Been - do you think that I do not know?

In his book "The Songs of Henry Lawson" Chris wrote:
This version is taken from Poetical Works of Henry Lawson, 1925.

Two final verses are printed below. They are from the original version of the poem and were later omitted, but the more I read them and understand their meaning, the more I am drawn to them.

They sneer or scoff, and they pray or groan, and the false friend plays his part.
Do you think that the blackguard who drinks alone knows aught of a pure girl's heart?
Knows aught of the first pure love of a boy with his warm young blood aglow,
Knows aught of the thrill of the world-old-joy - do you think that I do not know?

They say that I never have written of love, they say that my heart is such
That finer feelings are far above; but a writer may know too much.
There are darkest depths in the brightest nights, when the clustering stars hang low;
There are things it would break his strong heart to write - do you think that I do not know?
They double-lock at four o’clock; the warders leave their keys,
And the Governor strolls with a friend at eve through his stone conservatories;
Their window-sits are like idiot mouths, with square stone chins adrop,
And the weatherstains for the dibble, and the dead flat foreheads atop.

The press is printing its smug, smug lies, and paying its shameful debt -
It speaks of the comforts that prisoners have, and ‘holidays’ prisoners get.
The visitors come with their smug, smug smiles through the gaol on a working day,
And the public hears with its large, large ears what ‘Authorities’ have to say.

The champagne lady comes home from the course in charge of the criminal swell -
They carry her in from the motor-car to the lift in the Grand Hotel;
But armed with the savage ‘Habituals Act’ they are waiting for you and me -
And drunkards in judgement on drunkards sit (Keep step, One-Hundred-and-Three!)

The clever scoundrels are all outside, and the moneyless mugs in gaol -
Men do twelve months for a mad wife’s lies or Life for a strumpet’s tale.
If the people knew what the warders know, and felt as the prisoners feel -
If the people knew, they would storm their gaols as they stormed the old Bastille.

Ayi clang the spoon on the iron floor, and shove in the bread with your toe,
And shut with a bang the iron door, and clank the bolt-just so;
But One-Hundred-and-Three is near the End when the clonking gaol-bell sounds -
He cannot swallow the milk they send when the doctor has gone his rounds.

They have smuggled him out to the hospital, with no one to tell the tale,
But it’s little that doctor or nurses can do for the patient from Starvinghurst Gaol.
The blanket and screen are ready to draw... there are footsteps light and free -
And the angels are whispering over his bed: ‘Keep step-One-Hundred-and-Three.’

Do you think that I do not know?

They say that I never have written of love, as a writer of songs should do;
They say that I never could touch the strings with a touch that is firm and true;
They say I know nothing of women and men in the fields where Love’s roses grow,
I must write, they say, with a halting pen - do you think that I do not know?

Poem Henry Lawson
Music Chris Kempster

They say that I never have written of love, as a writer of songs should do;
They say that I never could touch the strings with a touch that is firm and true;
They say I know nothing of women and men in the fields where Love’s roses grow,
I must write, they say, with a halting pen - do you think that I do not know?
The teams

Chris Kempster (1965)

There’s the Red, White and Blue of the Frenchmen, where soldiers of Freedom are true. 
But lo! from the rear comes a banner, whose skirts lack the white and the blue! 

There’s the flag of a boastful republic, a country where Freedom is dear; 
But still, in the States there’s an army that waits ‘neath the Old Rebel Flag in the Rear.

There’s a new mongrel flag in Australia, and the ‘Banner of Britain’ is here. 
But, to break from the past, we are gathering fast ‘neath the Old Rebel Flag in the Rear.

There’s the Tsar’s cruel Eagle of Russia, where thousands are sunk in despair. 
And the hand of the tyrant is mighty, but the flag of rebellion is there!

There’s the bloodthirsty flag of the Kaiser, a monarch whom nations can fear. 
But William will pause ere he marches because of the Old Rebel Flag in the Rear.

We sing of the Queen of England, her banner that flaunts in the van; 
Yet out from the slums of her capital comes that vengeful red banner of man!

One hundred and three

Chris Kempster (1984)

Poem Henry Lawson
Music Chris Kempster

A cloud of dust on the long white road, and the teams go creeping on
Inch by inch with the weary load; and by the power of the green-hide goad
The distant goal is won.

With eyes half-shut to the blinding dust, and necks to the yokes bent low,
The beasts are pulling as bullocks must; and the shining tires might almost rust
While the spokes are turning slow.

With face half-hid ‘neath a broad-brimmed hat that shades from the heat’s white waves,
And shouldered whip with its green-hide plait, the driver plods with a gait like that
Of his weary, patient slaves.

He wipes his brow, for the day is hot, and spits to the left with spite;
He shouts at Bally, and flicks at Scot, and raises dust from the back of Spot,
And spits to the dusty right.

He’ll sometimes pause as a thing of form in front of a settler’s door,
And look for a drink, and remark, ‘It’s warm,’ or say, ‘There’s signs of a thunderstorm.’
But he seldom utters more.

The rains are heavy on roads like these; and, fronting his lonely home,
For days together the settler sees the waggons bogged to the axletrees,
Or ploughing the sodden loam.

And then when the roads are at their worst, the bushman’s children hear
The cruel blows of the whips reversed while bullocks pull as their hearts would burst,
And bellow with pain and fear.

And thus - with glimpses of home and rest - are the long, long journeys done;
And thus - ‘Tis a thankless life at the best - is distance fought in the mighty West,
And the lonely battles won.
The old rebel flag in the rear

Poem Henry Lawson
Music Chris Kempster

Whenever the march of oppression reduces a land to despair,
No matter how mighty the victors, the flag of Rebellion is there.
A spirit calls out of the future, and bids us to strike in our youth -
And the voice of today is appealing for Liberty, Justice and Truth;
Yet on through the arch of the morning we march 'neath the Old Rebel Flag in the Rear.

Chorus
'Twill never be furled while there's wrong in the world, it never will fall till there's justice for all,
That Old Rebel Flag, that Old Rebel Flag, that Old Rebel Flag in the Rear.

Chris Kempster sings "some" in place of "men", he has added the chorus.

The water-lily

Poem Henry Lawson
Music Chris Kempster

A lonely young wife in her dreaming discerns a lily-decked pool with a border of ferns.
And a beautiful child, with butterfly wings, trips down to the edge of the water and sings:

Chorus
'Come, mamma! come! quick! follow me - step out on the leaves of the water-lily!'

And the lonely young wife, her heart beating wild, cries, 'Wait till I come, till I reach you, my child!'
But the beautiful child with butterfly wings steps out on the leaves of the lily and sings:

And the wife in her dreaming steps out on the stream, but the lily leaves sink and she wakes from her dream.
Ah, the waking is sad, for the tears that it brings, and she knows 'tis her dead baby's spirit that sings:

Chris was a member of many choirs, groups and bands. Unity Singers, The Bushwhackers, Rambleers, Radiation Quartet.
Pictured here are the Larrikins:
Warren Fahey, Dave De Hugard, Chris Kempster and Bob McInnes
The days when we went swimming

Poem Henry Lawson
Music Chris Kempster

The breezes waved the silver grass, waist-high along the siding,
And to the creek we ne'er could pass three boys on bare-back riding;
Beneath the sheoaks in the bend the waterhole was brimming
Do you remember yet, old friend, the times we 'went in swimming'?

The days we 'played the wag' from school - joys shared - and paid for singly
The air was hot, the water cool - and naked boys are kingly!
With mud for soap the sun to dry - a well-planned lie to stay us,
And dust well rubbed on neck and face lest cleanliness betray us.

And you'll remember farmer Kutz - though scarcely for his bounty
He leased a forty-acre block, and thought he owned the county:
A farmer of the old world school, that men grew hard and grim in,
He drew his water from the pool that we preferred to swim in.

And do you mind when down the creek his angry way he wended,
A green-hide cartwhip in his hand for our young backs intended?
Three naked boys upon the sand - half buried and half sunning
Three startled boys without their clothes across the paddocks running.

We've had some scares, but we looked blank when, resting there and chumming,
We glanced by chance along the bank and saw the farmer coming!
Some home impressions linger yet of cups of sorrow brimming;
I hardly think that we'll forget the last day we went swimming.

Then Freedom couldn't stand the glare of Royalty's regalia,
She left the loafers where they were an' came out to Australia.
But now across the mighty main the chains have come to bind her.
She little thought to see again the wrongs she left behind her.

Our parents toiled to make a home, hard grubbin' 'twas and clearin',
They wasn't troubled much with lads when they was pioneerin'.
But now that we have made the land a garden full of promise,
Old Greed must crook 'is dirty hand an' come to take it from us.

So we must fly a rebel flag as others did before us,
And we must sing a rebel song, and join in rebel chorus.
We'll make the tyrants feel the sting o' those that they would throttle;
They needn't say the fault is ours if blood should stain the wattle.

Bertha

Poem Henry Lawson
Music Chris Kempster

Wide, solemn eyes that question me, wee hand that pats my head -
Where only two have stroked before, and both of them are dead.
"Ah, poo-ah Daddy mine," she says, with wondrous sympathy -
Oh, baby girl, you don't know how you break the heart in me!

Let friends and kinsfolk work their worst, let all say what they will,
Your baby arms go round my neck - I'm your own Daddy still!
And you kiss me and I kiss you, fresh kisses, frank and free -
Ah, baby girl, you don't know how you break the heart in me!

When I was good I dreamed that when the snow showed in my hair
A household angel in her teens would flit about my chair
To comfort me as I grew old; but that shall never be -
Ah, baby girl, you don't know how you break the heart in me!

But one shall love me while I live, and soothe my troubled head,
And never break an unkind word of me when I am dead.
Her eyes shall light to hear my name howe'er disgraced it be -
Ah, baby girl, you don't know how you help the heart in me!
The drover’s sweetheart

An hour before the sun goes down behind the ragged boughs,
I go across the little run to bring the dusty cows;
And once I used to sit and rest beneath the fading dome,
For there was one that I loved best who’d bring the cattle home.

Our yard is fixed with double bails; round one the grass is green,
The Bush is growing through the rails, the spike is rusted in;
It was from there his freckled face would turn and smile at me;
For he’d milk seven in a race while I was milking three.

He kissed me twice and once again and rode across the hill;
The pint-pots and the hobble-chain I hear them jingling still
About the hut the sunlight fails, the fire shines through the cracks -
I climb the broken stockyard rails and watch the bridle-tracks.

And he is coming back again - he wrote from Evatt’s Rock;
A flood was in the Darling then and foot-rot in the flock.
The sheep were falling thick and fast a hundred miles from town,
And when he reached the line at last he trucked the remnant down.

And so he’ll have to stand the cost; his luck was always bad,
Instead of making more, he lost the money that he had;
And how he’ll manage, Heaven knows (My eyes are getting dim)
He says - he says - he don’t suppose I’ll want - to - marry - him.

As if I wouldn’t take his hand without a golden glove -
Ooh! Jack, you men won’t understand how much a girl can love.
I long to see his face once more - Jack’s dog! thank God, it’s Jack! -
[I never thought I’d faint before) he’s coming - up - the track.

Freedom on the wallaby

Verse, Chris Kempster (1984); Chorus, trad.

Chorus

Australia’s a big country an’ Freedom’s humping bluey,
An’ Freedom’s on the wallaby, oh don’t you hear ‘er cooey.
She’s just begun to boomerang, she’ll knock the tyrants silly,
She’s going to light another fire and boil another billy.

Verse

Our fathers toiled for bitter bread while loafers thrived beside ‘em,
But food to eat and clothes to wear, their native land denied ‘em.
An’ so they left their native land in spite of their devotion,
An’ so they came, or if they stole were sent, across the ocean.
I've done with joys an' misery, an' why should I repine?
There's no one knows the past but me an' that ole dog o' mine.
We camp an' walk an' camp an' walk, an' find it fairly good;
He can do anything but talk, an' he wouldn't if he could.

We sits an' thinks beside the fire, with all the stars a-shine,
An' no one knows our thoughts but me an' that there dog o' mine.
We has our Johnny-cake an' 'scrag', an' find 'em fairly good;
He can do anything but talk, an' he wouldn't if he could.

He gets a 'possum now an' then, I cooks it on the fire;
He has his water, me me tea - what more could we desire?
He gets a rabbit when he likes, we finds it pretty good;
He can do anything but talk, an' he wouldn't if he could.

I has me smoke, he has his rest, when sunset's gettin' dim;
An' if I do get drunk at times, it's all the same to him.
So long's he's got me swag to mind, he thinks that times is good.
(He can do anything but talk, an' he wouldn't if he could.)

He gets his tucker from the cook, for cook is good to him.
An' when I sober up a bit, he goes and has a swim.
He likes the rivers where I fish, an' all the world is good:
He can do anything but talk, an' he wouldn't if he could.