THEY CAME TO
THUNDERBOLT COUNTRY
JEANE UPJOHN

Born in Tasmania, eldest daughter of a much travelled civil engineer, Jeane Upjohn spent most of her life learning about people. Following a career in public relations and journalism, she enrolled as a mature-age student at the University of New England. After graduating as B.A. and M.Litt., she became an editorial representative for a group of ocean-oriented magazines, and a columnist for a coastal newspaper. Her love of folk tales and a nose for newsworthy stories led her to Oral History. Ms Upjohn has published one other volume of folk history, The Jetty People, and a small book of children’s poems, Poems for Possums.

THEY CAME TO
THUNDERBOLT COUNTRY

JEAN LUPBOE

With a Foreword by
Professor Russell Braden

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
AUSTRALIA
1987
Contents

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreword</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction — They Came to Thunderbolt Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Road to Sandon County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Family at West End</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Crime and Punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Boys Will Be Boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Practical People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Gentlemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>School Days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Death and Destruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Accomplished Rogues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Shades of Shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Circuit Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Grand Openings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

Three hundred years ago a wise parliamentary lawyer, John Selden, wrote two uncommonly perceptive sentences about the nature of history:

Though some make slight of Libells, yet you may see by them how the wind sitts: as, take a straw and throw it upp into the aire, you shall see by that which way the wind is, which you shall not doe by casting up a stone — More solid things doe not shew the Complexion of the times so well as Ballads and libells.

By 'libells' Selden meant what we should refer to as the raw material of oral history or folk history — old people's recollections, popular sayings and ideas, songs and stories, none of them necessarily checked, authenticated, or even written down. Mere pub gossip, some would say: but others, more and more every year, would agree with Selden. It all depends on what kind of history you want.

Those who seek a reasoned argument about past changes, carried out or presided over for the most part by 'great men' or the occasional 'great woman', will seldom learn much from popular songs or 'old wives' tales', though there are exceptions. For example, the politico-religious history of England for the century following 1660 will never be so memorably figured forth or in so few words as those of the anonymous old ballad,

The Vicar of Bray:

In good king Charles's golden days
When loyalty no harm meant,
A zealous High Churchman was I
And so I got preferment.
To teach my flock I never missed
Kings were by God appointed,
And lost are those that dare resist
Or touch the Lord's anointed.
Chorus
And this is the law that I'll maintain
Until my dying day, sir:
That whatsoever king shall reign
I'll be the Vicar of Bray, sir.
When royal James possessed the crown
And Popery grew in fashion,
The penal laws I hooted down
And read the Declaration.
The Church of Rome I found would fit
Full well my constitution,
And I had become a Jesuit
But for the Revolution.

Chorus
When William was our King declared
To ease the nation's grievance;
With this new wind about I steered
And swore to him allegiance.
Old principles I did revoke,
Set conscience at a distance.
Passive obedience was a joke.
A jest was non-resistance.

Chorus
When royal Anne became our Queen,
The Church of England's glory,
Another face of things was seen
And I became a Tory.
Occasional conformists base,
I blamed their moderation,
And thought the church in danger was
By such prevarication.

Chorus
When George in pudding time came o'er
And moderate men looked big sir:
My principles I changed once more
And I became a Whig, sir,
And thus preferment I procured
From our new faith's defender,
And almost every day abjured
The Pope and the Pretender.

Chorus
The illustrious house of Hanover
And Protestant succession,
To these I do allegiance swear —
While they can keep possession:
For in my faith and loyalty
I never more will falter
And George my lawful king will be —
Until the times do alter.

Chorus
This old 'libell' undeniably tells us much about the conventional subject-matter of history: — great changes in public institutions and the names of great people who represented them; but it tells us a great deal more about the "Complexion of the times". Volumes could not better explain the increasing cynicism and materialism of English society and the English church after the Restoration, or why the second half of the eighteenth century is still known as The Age of Reason. If the historian is interested in social attitudes and beliefs rather than deeds or events, then folk history or oral history may be a better source than official institutional records, and oral history is all the more valuable if it happens to be written down, no matter how many factual mistakes it may contain.

Those who decry oral history do not care to remember that it was, and still is, the origin of all history. The poetry which constitutes the 'Homeric' epics was composed and passed orally from singer to singer for generations before it. Herodotus's Histories, or anything else was written down in the Greek language; before in fact there was a written Greek language. Practically all we know of the first two hundred and fifty years of English history was written down by the Venerable Bede who died in 735, or by the compilers of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle who worked over a century later. The 'First Fleet' bringing the English invaders to Kent arrived, the Chronicle tells us, in 446 A.D. So everything that happened in the first quarter of a millennium of English history is oral history: what Bede learnt from old men's stories, or travellers' tales, or possibly from the manuscript of Gildas, a monk, whose own book was necessarily based on the same kind of second, or hundred-and-third hand, oral reports.

But what of Bede's well known account of the Synod of Whitby held only four years before his own death? Surely that cannot be seen as second hand or oral history? That depends on whether the historian himself was actually present in the hall where the great lay and ecclesiastical leaders of the time carried on their debate. It seems highly probable that he was an eye-witness of the event he describes and so, on this occasion, a proper historian. If not, the accuracy of this account depends entirely on the memories and the veracity of his informants who were in the hall. Similarly it is well known that even Hansard reports of parliamentary oratory do not necessarily constitute an accurate record of
These reflections have been occasioned by re-reading of The Australian Legend and a first reading of They Came to Thunderbolt Country. Jeanne Upjohn’s book engagingly exhibits the virtues of folk history.

My argument is that oral or popular history, whether or not in printed form, is much more important than traditionalists have allowed. It is a very much greater component than we realize of all history even of the form, is much more important than traditionalists have allowed. It is a much more subject to criticism, verification, correction, or damnation by other historians.

Written history differs in another way from oral or popular history. Traditionally history has always been concerned with great changes in society which affect whole nations or other large groups of people. It is concerned with public, political, religious and industrial events seen to be carried out by great public figures. Oral history, by contrast, tends to be concerned with common people’s private and domestic lives, and with small groups of people.

My argument is that oral or popular history, whether or not in printed form, is much more important than traditionalists have allowed. It is a very much greater component than we realize of all history, even of the best history, and it often throws light on aspects of the past completely neglected by ‘great’ historians. It also has the great advantage of being made as often by the vanquished, as by the victors. That is why it is as interested in the poor and inarticulate many, or those seen as their champions, as in the distinguished few; in small obscure communities, as in the great and famous ones; in common or general movements of human feeling, as in particular or class ones. Finally we have called the shadow of the Venerable Bede, incomparably the greatest historian of his time and place, to witness that an oral history of any community, large or small, is a great deal better than no history at all.

These reflections have been occasioned by re-reading of The Australian Legend and a first reading of They Came to Thunderbolt Country. Jeanne Upjohn’s book engagingly exhibits the virtues of folk history.
people worked out of doors through New England winters with their feet swathed in rags to keep out the cold.

So much for the "Complexion of the times". What of the facts one might expect to find in a conventional or 'proper' history? There are plenty of them, some even concerning 'great' people, 'great' that is at least in the minute world of Uralla. Samuel and Martha McCrossin, for instance, brought their seven children from County Tyrone to Sandon County in the bounty ship Cadet in 1841. Their youngest son built McCrossin's Mill, became an explorer, and died as Uralla's most prominent citizen. Edward Trickett, champion sculler in 1876, and the first Australian world champion in any sport, lies buried in the Salvation Army section of Uralla's Cemetery. His son founded the store at what used to be known as Trickett's Corner; but the most interesting facts are of another sort.

Bruce Smith told how as a lad he helped a young man to build a bark hut. As this was, after their tent, the first type of habitation made by the early white settlers in the bush, nineteenth century books and manuscripts often gave a new-chum directions on how it was done. All that I have read omitted any reference to the crucial part of the operation, which happened to stick in the little boy's memory. The green sheets of bark, cut from the living ironbark or other eucalypt, were cylindrical or semi-cylindrical in shape. To flatten them out for hut building the bushman had to pass each sheet, its wet hollow side downwards, slowly back and forth over the embers of a very hot fire. This is the kind of fact that oral history is best at; but I want finally to stress that often the oral historian's statements are not much less likely to be factually correct than those of the most dry-as-dust academic. Just one case in point.

The first white invaders under Lieutenant Bowen occupied Risdon Cove in Van Diemen's Land in September 1803. Eight months later on 4th May 1804 soldiers commanded by Lieutenant Moore of the 'Rum Corps' (101st Regiment) began destroying the black Tasmanian race. As most people were illiterate, Moore gave what was for long the only written account, and is still the official account of events. Five to six hundred Aborigines approached the British camp in such a threatening manner that he ordered the soldiers to fire and "a few natives" were killed. Moore did not report the ages, sex, or number of the dead. This account was passed on by Lieutenant-Governor Collins to Governor Macquarie in Sydney and so on to the colonial authorities in London where it became the definitive historical record of the incident. So it would probably have remained, but for the wagging tongues of some we may legitimately call illiterate oral historians, who happened to have been present that morning.

Over twenty years later Governor Arthur appointed a committee of white gentlemen to enquire into the causes of the black people's implacable hostility. A convict workman gave the committee a very different account of the slaughter. Hundreds, or at any rate many score of unarmed men, women and children, spread out in a half moon formation, came down the gully waving branches in token of peace. They were driving a mob of kangaroos before them. They did not threaten anybody. Moore ordered the soldiers to start shooting at about eleven o'clock. A great many black Tasmanians were killed and wounded, perhaps fifty or sixty. "Some of their bones were sent in two casks to Port Jackson by Dr. Mountgarrett," added Edward White, the convict who had been weilding his hoe nearby when the massacre began. James Bonwick, who recorded these folk stories in 1869, seemed to endorse another informant's suggestion that Moore was still drunk after a night on the bottle, and ordered the slaughter, merely "from a brutal desire to see the NIGGERS run!"

What follows is incomparably the best history of Uralla and District we have. More, it is the best history of a comparably small Australian community that I have ever read.

Russel Ward