



## 'Pity the Bandless Towns': Brass Banding in Australian Rural Communities Before World War Two

John Whiteoak

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# 'Pity the Bandless Towns': Brass Banding in Australian Rural Communities Before World War Two

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by John Whiteoak

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## Abstract

Wind band music has been part of Australian life from the beginning of colonisation. Reed and brass and all-brass bands became central to the fabric of the social and cultural life of a vast number of small and large communities beyond the chief cities. Proud and progressive rural communities produced some of the best contesting bands of the pre-World War One era but urbanisation, metropolitan dominance of banding and other factors gradually reversed the fortunes of rural banding. This article surveys, quantifies, and describes the role of banding in rural communities and its substantial decline by 1940. The study is made possible through the author's ownership of a unique private Australian band history archive, The Arthur Stirling Collection, which includes the only known extant runs of early (pre-1925) Australian band journals (Whiteoak 1995, pp. 4-10).

## Introduction

*Like all the country bands, we work at a disadvantage. Dairymen with sixty odd cows to milk, and some twelve miles away; boys not yet 12 months on instrument; ...an old joker whose best days are far away yet must play solo cornet to keep [us] going. (Australasian Band and Orchestra News 26 December 1934, p. 22.)*

For many rural communities, their once culturally, socially, civically and musically indispensable town band tradition dwells only in the faded recollections of a few older citizens, or a town rotunda, its original purpose long forgotten. Some bands beyond the metropolitan areas have survived for over a century and still flourish. Warragul Municipal Band (established in 1888) in Gippsland, Victoria, claims for example that 'without doubt the most successful era was from the mid-1970s until the present day...'.<sup>1</sup> Yet the historical evidence shows that the 'great era' of musical, cultural and social relevance for rural (and metropolitan) banding was already in decline by the 1920s. Overall, banding in Australia has never regained the social and cultural status it enjoyed in the first half of the twentieth century, although the sound of the all-brass band has attracted new interest in recent decades, as seen for example in new Australian compositions for brass band or an impressive influx of young women instrumentalists.

This article examines the role of amateur bands and banding in rural society until World War Two but placed within a chronologically longer and broader tapestry of Australia wind band history. The primary goal of the article is to interpret the early twentieth century

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<sup>1</sup> Warragul Municipal Band Inc. Recruitment information booklet, 2003, n.p.

emergence of the standardised and codified amateur brass band movement from a rural perspective. It also aims to show how rural banding changed over time relative to metropolitan banding and, in particular, how and why it declined in substance and spirit from the 1910s.

### **Towards a Definition of Rural or 'Country' Banding**

The term 'banding', coined by the British amateur brass band movement which the Australian amateur movement emulated, can be described as participating in, supporting and identifying with the music-making, philosophies, rules, organisational structures, and social and other activities of the amateur band world. This is notwithstanding the fact that banding as an organised amateur activity overlaps with other wind band spheres, including the Salvation Army band movement, military or civil service banding and professional popular entertainment bands, such as the traditional travelling circus bands that declined from the 1920s.

Discussion of rural banding as a discrete 'musical world' is, however, fraught with difficulty.<sup>2</sup>

It is not practical to speak of a binary relationship between 'rural' and 'metropolitan' wind band music before the mid-nineteenth century, since the development and expansion that made, for example, Adelaide, Melbourne or Perth into metropolises had not yet occurred. Furthermore—and as the subheading of this issue of *Rural Society* suggests—the term 'rural' does not

convincingly embrace many of the non-metropolitan locations where bands have been established. These include very large regional towns or secondary cities where daily life and professional, educational and other opportunities were often more comparable with those of the chief city and its suburbs than life in or near a small country town. It is self-evident that the conditions and contingencies of banding in a large, perhaps industrialised, inland or coastal town differed greatly from those of a small isolated and agriculture-dependant rural community. The term 'rural banding' cannot be used as a precise demographic or geographic descriptor but, as a notion, it is comparable to 'the country' as applied to 'country music': a type of banding with an identity that differs in certain ways from that of metropolitan banding. Bands beyond the metropolitan areas generally described themselves in their monthly band journal reports as 'country bands' (or 'town bands' and less commonly 'rural' bands). Their musical world, its activities and special contingencies can therefore be collectively described as banding in the country or just country banding.

The most fundamental problem is, however, discussing country banding in Australia without simply reproducing much of what has already been written about Australian banding and its history in general. Both metropolitan and country banding share many aspects of a common wind band history and rural and metropolitan banding activities of the period under discussion frequently overlapped, were integrated, and shared many common characteristics. They were also documented in the same

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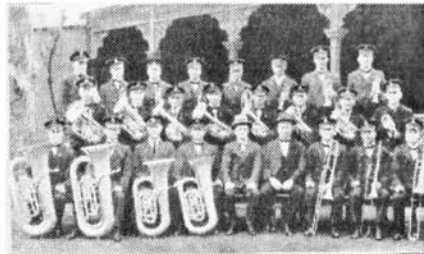
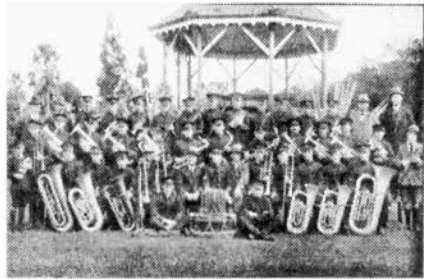
<sup>2</sup> In *The hidden musicians: Music-making in an English town* (Finnegan 1989) sociologist Ruth Finnegan uses the term 'musical worlds' to describe the collective identities that musicians and their followings create in various, frequently overlapping, fields of activity such as brass band, dance band and amateur orchestral playing.

band journals. Neither can rural brass band music be distinguished very much by repertoire, performance practices or behaviour, since being different—musically or in other ways—ran counter to the aims and ethos of the Australian banding movement overall.

In his insightful study of brass banding in Britain, Arthur Taylor explains that

*Brass banding was, if you like to look at things that way, yet another example of the Victorians' skill at codifying unruly sports and making them respectable. The competing brass band had twenty four players, and one would no more think of changing that number than suggesting that football or cricket teams should field twelve players... (Taylor 1983, p. 6).*

The state-wide organisations that developed in Australia also vigorously pursued national codification and structures that could facilitate precisely regulated national band championships. The brief of these state-wide and national band organisations was to create a homogenised banding world where all potentially troublesome difference was eliminated, smoothed over, or filtered out to provide a uniform and level playing field for all participants, metropolitan or otherwise—precisely as in sport. In looking through Australian band journal photographs, for example, one is immediately struck by the military-like uniformity of appearance of post-World War One town and suburban bands, the sameness of monthly individual bands reports, and so forth. The all-brass instrumentation and the homogenous sound it produces is a metaphor for 'sameness'.



Sameness: Albury Town band and Brunswick Municipal Band (*Stirling Collection*)

*Australasian Band and Orchestra News*  
*Australasian Band and Orchestra News*  
26 March 1928, p.31  
26 August 1927, p. 27

Yet this notion of sameness, or homogeneity points to possible approaches to understanding the musical, social and cultural roles of banding in rural communities. For example, the socially and musically 'level playing field' of banding provided distinctive advantages and disadvantages to rural communities that can be examined and discussed. For example, the homogeneity of brass band playing and repertoire enabled a talented and capable rural bandsman to immediately replace a counterpart in any brass band, anywhere. It therefore offered opportunities comparable with those provided to promising rural footballers by talent-hungry Australian Rules football organisations. Some

of the disadvantages to be discussed were the outcome of fluctuating or shifting demographics resulting from temporary or permanent changes in the fortunes of individual towns or regions, smaller pools of available musical talent and educators than those of metropolitan communities, or (to borrow from Blainey 1966) sheer 'tyranny of distance', especially before motorised road transport became widespread. Furthermore, where bands in rural areas perceived that this 'playing field' privileged metropolitan bands, they developed strategies such as regionalism—consolidation of regional resources—to try and correct the offending imbalance. The sum of the differences to be discussed provides a sense of rural or country banding as having a discrete and interesting identity and history.

### **Early Rural Band History**

Wind band music reached Australia in 1788 with the drum and fife band musicians of the Marines attached to the first fleet. The British regiments that garrisoned the colonies from 1809 to 1870 also carried regimental reed and brass bands, and their instrumentalists had a major role in early colonial musical entertainment, playing for public concerts, balls, church services, and popular theatre, and also as music teachers. This musical influence was, however, concentrated in settlements or areas in particular need of a military presence. The presence of bandsmen particularly privileged the early musical life of Sydney, Hobart, and, from 1852, gold rush era Melbourne, where the band of the 40th Regiment was based for some time. It might be imagined that this geographical concentration of military banding influence was the

beginning of a binary relationship between metropolitan and country banding in which country banding would henceforth develop as secondary to metropolitan banding. This was not the case until the following century, however. An important factor in this delay was the 1850-60s emergence of a military volunteer movement, which decentralised the influence of military banding.

Early reports of the Crimean war and consequent fear of Russian invasion provided the first major impulse for the establishment of a volunteer military force. The movement developed rapidly from the late 1850s, especially in Victoria and NSW. As it spread, bands were established to provide accompaniment for drills, ceremonies, night marches, camp concerts, and so forth. Volunteer bands also accepted paid engagements for town processions, local dances, concerts and other functions. Band contests were held at the Easter volunteer camps from the early 1860s. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, the emergence of non-military town bands was deeply entwined with that of volunteer movement banding.<sup>3</sup> Some volunteer bands functioned as town bands, such as the popular Geelong Garrison Artillery Band, which became the Geelong Garrison Artillery Town Band before 1903. Volunteer bandsmen who tired of restrictive military regulations sometimes reformed their band as a town or private band with no military affiliations. For example, Bulch's Model Brass band was the 3rd Battalion Militia band of Ballarat until the band resigned en masse in 1887 after a dispute with the military (Smith 1987, p. 65).

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<sup>3</sup> For more detailed military band history see Bannister & Whiteoak 2003, pp. 412-415.

GEE LONG  
**Garrison Artillery**  
**TOWN BAND.**  
 IN JOHNSTONE PARK,  
 On Friday Evening, March 27th.

**VERY SPECIAL PERFORMANCE.**  
 Mr. Alex. Gunn's Bioscope Views.  
 Coronation Celebrations in India.  
 Great Durbar at Delhi on January 1st, 1903

Geelong Artillery Town Band.

**PROGRAMME:**

1. March—"Mocking Bird" .....	(G. I. Brown)
2. Overture—"La Traviata" .....	(Vardi)
3. Valse—"Blumen Regen" .....	(Gunn's Favourite)
4. BIOSCOPE VIEWS BY MR. ALEX. GUNN	
5. Maçade Dance—"Singing while Weeping" .....	(J. ...)
6. Grand Selection—"I Due Forcart" .....	(Frank)
7. BIOSCOPE VIEWS BY MR. ALEX. GUNN	
8. Operatic Lancers—"Prima Donna" .....	(T. Wright)
9. American Fantasia—"In Cooland" .....	(The Ridge)
10. BIOSCOPE VIEWS BY MR. ALEX. GUNN	
11. Selection—"Gwalia" .....	(H. Reed)
12. Quickstep—"Thy Voice is Near" .....	(T. Reed)

National Anthem.  
 John H. Graves, Bandmaster.

ADMISSION:  
 Adults, 6d. Children, 3d.

1903 program for Geelong Artillery Garrison Town Band (Stirling Collection)

## Town and Private Band Development

Town or 'private' bands and temperance bands began to appear even before the beginning of the volunteer movement. The fledgling settlement of Melbourne, for example, had a 'town band' by 1839, a temperance society band by 1848 and a saxhorn (all brass) band the following year. Adelaide also had a band by this time and the many German immigrants to South Australian rural areas brought

their own church and secular band traditions. The German-founded town of Tanunda in the Barossa Valley has been a national destination for amateur band contesting since the 1920s and produced the state's first A grade band.<sup>4</sup>

The 1850s gold rush created a boom for popular entertainment and drew itinerant street bands, especially so-called 'German bands', to the inland settlements that sprang to life in proximity to the richest fields. A more important factor in the development of town banding was, however, the post-1851 increase in British immigration, including bandsmen from British mining districts. Many of them tried to make their fortunes as gold prospectors, but later turned to mining company, agriculture, trade and other rural employment. 'Brass bands' (generally a mix of reeds and brass at that time) were also hired by travelling circuses and brought band music and enthusiasm for bands to the remote and not so remote communities they visited. A strong tradition also developed of individual town bandsmen augmenting the circus band for its tentside concert performances in exchange for free entry to the show (Whiteoak 1999b, p. 59-72).

Prior to the 1840s, British village bands were assembled from the wide array of brass and reed instruments then in use, including flutes, keyed bugles, French horns, serpents (wooden bass horn) and ophicleides. Early colonial town bands had to make do with whatever combination of reed and brass instruments could be assembled. What followed in Britain—and somewhat later in Australia—was the gradual establishment of uniformly regulated band contesting, widespread distribution

<sup>4</sup> For a history of the Tanunda band published for the 100 year anniversary of the band and its commemoration concert see *100 years of banding in Tanunda: Historical souvenir and program of the Tanunda town band 1860-1960*, 1960, Barossa News, Tanunda, SA. (held by author).

of the newly developed saxhorn family of valve horn instruments (soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone and bass), which became the basis of the modern standardised brass band, and an increasing availability of all-brass band arrangements.

Notwithstanding the continuing influx of immigrants with British banding experience, town band development remained haphazard and individual to each town. For example, even by the early 1860s the Echuca borough band still played by ear on occasions in the manner of many early British village bands (Hellings 1917a, p. 12). Development was often contingent upon the arrival of a talented and forceful migrant to establish a local band, or else was associated with military service banding in the area. Entire bands that migrated to Victoria in the first two decades of the late nineteenth century include Prout's Ballarat Band (formerly of Cornwall) and Nat Hallas's Lancashire Band (a travelling circus band for a time), which eventually settled in Bendigo (Goode 1920, p 9). Early bands in towns frequently carried the name of the bandleader and were relatively self-serving, as opposed to serving and in turn being supported by a specific town community. They were usually called 'private bands', even if they were based in a particular town. Later resident bands of a town or district increasingly took the name of their town or district if they were not associated with or sponsored by an organisation, volunteer or paid civil service or employer.

From the mid 1870s individual town and even city suburban communities throughout Australia became cognisant of the social, cultural and civic capital that accrued from having a town or

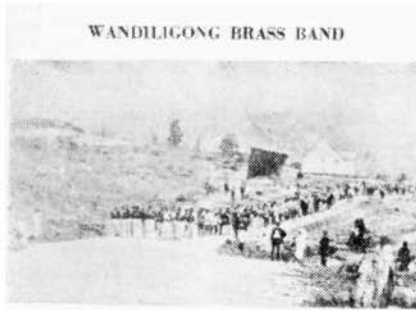
municipal band. The well turned-out modern (all-brass or mostly brass) band became emblematic of a progressive, prosperous, proud and socially cohesive community, and a credit to the town's administrators. By the 1890s, 'People commenced to remark that a town without the socialising influence of a brass band was lacking in dignity and importance' (Hellings 1917a, p. 12). By the 1920s it was still adamantly claimed that a town band was a 'Symptom of Prosperity' and that 'The Town Without a Band is a Town without a Soul'.<sup>5</sup>

### **Mining Region Banding**

Banding became especially well established in towns or regions where prosperity, employment and, as a corollary, social stability were not dependant on agriculture. Australian mining areas played an important role in early banding development since they attracted immigrants from British mining areas with well-developed banding traditions. Prosperous mining companies (or, later, foundry or steelwork companies) brought prosperity to townships and the long term social stability and regular shift-work enabled bands to establish and maintain numbers and ensure regular practice night attendance. However, banding often withered when mineral deposits became unviable. A poignant metaphor for this phenomenon is the ghostly rotunda that dominates the historical remains of the town of Walhalla, situated in a remote mountain gorge in Gippsland, Victoria. Along with six adjacent mining hamlets, it supported a mining population that peaked at about 4500 in the 1880s and also its own Walhalla Mountaineers' Brass Band.

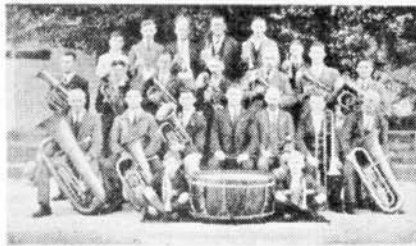
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<sup>5</sup> Unsigned editorial in *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, September 26, 1925, p. 1.



Wandiligong Band in 1862

Mr. G. Williams, father of the present bandmaster, was a member of this band.



Wandiligong Band in 1935

*Wandiligong (gold mining) town band in 1862 and 1935. Australasian Band and Orchestra News, 26 January 1936, p. 23 (Stirling Collection)*

Mining towns or districts that produced contest winning bands or otherwise developed strong traditions of banding include, among numerous others, Ararat, Ballarat, Beechworth, Bendigo, Clunes, Creswick, Daylesford, St Arnaud, and various Gippsland coal mining towns in Victoria; Broken Hill, Cobar, Cessnock, Kurri Kurri, Newcastle and Wallsend in New South Wales; Coolgardie, Kalgoorlie and Boulder districts in Western Australia; Gympie in Queensland; and the Gawler district

in South Australia. The Lord Nelson Miners' Band from St Arnaud won the first of the famous South Street Contests at Ballarat in 1900. Third and fourth places were taken by Prout's of Ballarat and Eaglehawk of Bendigo (in a tie with Launceston).<sup>6</sup> South St. winnings and placings for mining town or mining region bands for the period 1901-5 (not including marching contest results) are similarly revealing:<sup>7</sup>

1901

Newcastle (first)  
Lord Nelson (third)  
Eaglehawk (fourth in a tie with Launceston)

1902

Newcastle (first)  
Boulder City (second)

1903

Newcastle (first)  
Boulder City (second)  
A.W.A Miners Band (Boulder region, third in a tie with an Adelaide band)

1904

A.W.A Miners Band (first)

1905

Boulder City (first)  
Newcastle (third)

## Contesting

Band contesting before 1900 was often ad hoc and based on personal rivalry between nearby town bands, including 'battles' in which two bands playing simultaneously tried to simply subdue

<sup>6</sup> *South St. Competition Brass Band Contest 1900 Judges Report* (original 4 page printed document held by author)

<sup>7</sup> 'South St. Contests: a Thirty-Year Review', *The Ballarat Courier*, and October 27 1932 pp. 1-8 (special South St. supplement).

each other with sheer volume and stamina. The veteran bandsman and *Australian Band News* editor, Thomas Hellings, recalled in 1917 that by the mid 1890s:

*The contesting era had set in. Fired by ambition to excel above their fellows, brass bands vied with each other on the contest field in order to determine which was the better band. ...Local bodies who drew their milk of sustenance from the gentle public perceived new and valuable possibilities through the medium of the new craze—Contesting.* (1997b, np).

He also describes the first contest at St Arnaud, Victoria, and the 'white heat' rivalry between St Arnaud's Miners Band and the town's other band, Hellings' Model Band. Hellings' band prevailed. The nearby town of Maryborough noted the success of the St Arnaud contest and added a band contest to their Highland Society festival, which the two St Arnaud's bands entered, along with the Maryborough town band. Hellings claims that between respective supporters of the rival St Arnaud bands: 'Fights were often narrowly averted. Lifelong friendships were sundered owing to the rancour and bitterness that prevailed' (1997b, np).<sup>8</sup> Disagreement then ensued about how contests should be run.

Hellings' reflections on the onset of the contesting craze illustrate some common threads in rural band contesting: the desire to excel above other bands, extrovert and emotive (sports-like) barracking, rivalry between nearby town bands or between two bands in

the same town, disagreement about the contest entrance rules (and the conduct of entrants and judges), and local bodies introducing a band contest to boost an existing annual town event. The most successful example of the latter was the interpolation of the South Street band contest into the annual South Street Eisteddfod at Ballarat, later called the Grand National Eisteddfod of Australasia. South Street became the 'Mecca' of Australian band contesting despite its many problems, discontinuities, and the gradual dominance of metropolitan contestants from around 1905.

### **A Level Playing Field**

Moves towards creating the 'level playing field' required for fair band contesting had to await the formation of state associations (or leagues) capable of widely enforcing standardised contest rules and grading bands to A grade, B grade, and so forth. Some early associations were, in fact, formed beyond the capital cities, for example, the Western Band Association in Bathurst, NSW, which predated the Sydney based Band Association of New South Wales (formed 1895). However, state-wide banding administration and influence were increasingly centred in the state capitals where many vigorous and stable suburban bands were concentrated. Australia-wide rules covering every aspect of contesting and authorised by the Australian Band Council in Sydney were gazetted in *Australasian Band and Orchestra News* of 26 April 1934.<sup>9</sup> Only bands registered with the state body could enter their authorised contests and obtain a formal

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<sup>8</sup> See also a Bendigo band report in *Australasian Bandsman* of February 7 1907, p. 19 lamenting the level of 'antagonism' and 'personal bitterness' that had developed between Echuca's two rival contesting bands, Echuca Federal band and the Echuca Rangers.

contest grading (D,C, B or A grade).

Other factors necessary for a level playing field were the establishment of the all-brass band as the basic contesting ensemble and the reinforcement of this 'evolution' through the availability of commercial (and therefore totally standardised) all-brass arrangements suitable for performance by amateur brass instrument players of mixed ability. The simple three valve system for all the brass instruments (except the slide trombone) meant that players could quickly teach themselves valve fingering from a manual and also move from one category of brass instrument to another with comparative ease, as required. The three valve system also provided a level playing field for, say, miners or agricultural workers who did heavy manual work, since the degree of finger dexterity required for playing reed instruments such as the clarinet was not required.

<b>WAGGA</b>		
<b>CITIZENS' BRASS BAND CONTEST</b>		
To be held at Wagga on Easter Monday.		
APRIL 8th. 1912.		
£145 PRIZE MONEY	<b>BRASS BAND CONTEST.</b>	PRIZE MONEY £145
Band Section - B Grade - Under Band Association Rules of N.S.W.		
Test Selection	First Prize	£25
Test March	Second	£10
Right M. (Solo Contest)	Third	£5
OWN CHOICE SELECTION. First prize £25.		
TEST MARCH		
Reference Fee		
First prize £10. Second £5.		
Reference Fee		
£1 1s		
For further particulars apply J. BEYLI, Hon. Sec., Lawson Street, Wagga.		

An advertisement for a contest for B Grade bands in Wagga Wagga NSW, Easter 1912. *Australasian Bandsman*, 1 March

### 1912 (Stirling Collection)

All-brass musical arrangements contributed to creating a level playing field for country band players and bandmasters with limited access to formal musical education, since all the band parts (except the trombones) were pre-transposed by the commercial arranger to be read in just one clef (treble clef), including bass parts. The initial difficulty of obtaining appropriate all-brass scores in Australia encouraged composer-arranger bandleaders such as Thomas Bulch, Alex Lithgow or Charles Trussell to write and publish all-brass arrangements, transcriptions (from orchestral music), and compositions. For example Bulch, the most prolific of all of them all, wrote and published pieces like his very popular *The Postman's Parade*, *Antipodes*, *Craigielee*, *Phonograph*, or *Bonnie Jennie Gray* as 'Good and Easy' pieces for the fledgling Australian movement. *The Fairy Queen*, a 'Solo Polka', was marketed in 1896 as 'Easy and melodious, a perfect gem by the bandmaster of Wagga band', namely Fred W. Homann.<sup>10</sup> Bulch (and others) also named band compositions after Australian banding towns including *Ballarat* (and *South St*), *Bathurst*, *Bendigo*, *Gawler*, *Hopetoun*, *Lyndhurst*, *Newcastle*, *Peak Hill* and *Sandhurst*. These are, in an oblique way, musical manifestations of country banding.

### Periodicals

Australian band periodicals were initially produced beyond the chief cities and played an important role in creating the sense or illusion of a homogenous, Australia-wide banding movement, embracing remote rural and metropolitan areas. For example, *Intercolonial Brass Band News* was

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* pp. 28-32

<sup>10</sup> 'Music for 1896' catalogue (a burnt document with publishers name missing: most likely Thomas Bulch)

published from July 1893 at Dandenong (Victoria), from 1901 in Bathurst (NSW) as *(The) Australasian Bandsman*, and from 1923 to 1925 in Sydney. The Victorian equivalent, *Australian Band News* made a comparable relocation from Bairnsdale to Melbourne in the early 1920s, with various successive title changes (Dart & Whiteoak 2003, pp. 509-10).



*Hughenden town band in 1890 from The Bandsman's Year Book, Sydney, The Band Council of Control 1938, p. 25 (Stirling Collection)*



*[The cover of the Australasian Bandsman published in Bathurst NSW, 7 February 1908 (Stirling Collection)]*

Country banding was very strongly represented in the Bathurst published *Australasian Bandsman*, with every issue bringing detailed reports from the corresponding representatives of various town bands throughout Australia. These often provide colourful insight into country banding culture, activities, and special concerns. For example, Warracknabeal band reported in early 1908 that 'The farmers thought the crops would be a total failure, therefore the implement makers' orders got very low...so many of our bandsmen were out of work'.<sup>11</sup> Advertisements in the 'Wanted: Bandmasters and Bandsmen' columns lured musicians to towns in all parts of rural Australia with promises of non-musical employment. Band

<sup>11</sup> 'Warracknabeal', *Australasian Bandsman*, 7 February 1908, p. 25.

musicians offered, through this column, to play in town bands in exchange for numerous types of work including coach trimmer, tinsmith, miner, printer, grocer, ironmonger, photographer, wheelwright, harness maker, labourer, or simply (as one prospective bandmaster put it) a 'reasonable all-round living'.<sup>12</sup>

Rural reports range from formulaic to effusive. In the March 1912 issue, correspondent "Tempo", for the small and recently resurrected town band of Ganmain (NSW), begins effusively before becoming almost self-deprecating:

*How do you do Mr. Editor? The fame of your valuable journal is fast becoming recognised by all country bands throughout this vast Commonwealth, and may its popularity increase as the years roll by. As this is the first news you have ever had from us it may not be of much interest to you but perhaps there are bandsmen in other towns...who would like to know how things are progressing with our band.*

He later complains that: 'As in the case of most country bands we have great trouble in getting the boys "yarded" up for practice, several of whom think that because they can play the scales from a book consider they are competent musicians'.<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding the ever increasing enthusiasm for contesting, pre-World War One country bands seem, from these reports, to have been more

enthusiastic about their playing engagements and social activities than in later years when contesting success or failure became for many an almost total preoccupation. Many reports list entire musical programs (generally without details of the composer or arranger) performed at engagements and these, overall, provide some insight into what country bandsmen of that era considered to be suitable for public entertainment. The following genres and titles are typical:<sup>14</sup>

Wagga Wagga town band concert program reported on September 6 1907, p. 31:

Sacred March: *St Michaels* (William Rimmer)  
Tenor horn solo: *The Holy City* (Frederick Weatherly)  
Song: *Asleep in the Deep* (Henry Petree)  
Overture: *Overtuana* (Carl Somers)  
Slide trombone solo: *Pilgrims of Love* (Henry Bishop)  
Sacred march: *Salvation* (T. Tiost)<sup>15</sup>

Young town band (unspecified) engagement program reported on the same page:

March: *Death or Glory* (Robert Hall)  
Waltz: *Yringa*  
Romance: *Alice Where Art Thou* (Geo. Jackson)  
Selection: *Maritana* (Vincent Wallace)  
Waltz: *Wein, Weib, and [sic] Gesang* (Johann Strauss)  
March: *Waggon Hill*  
Selection: *Gems of America*  
Waltz: *Mello*  
Selection: *Songs of Scotland*  
*God Save the King*

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<sup>12</sup> *Australasian Bandsman*, 6 September 1907, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Australasian Bandsman*, March 1912, p. 24

<sup>14</sup> Some of the titles may have been arrangements by the town bandmaster. This was common practice before WW1.

<sup>15</sup> I have been unable to trace a composer of this name and suggest that it may be a misspelling.

The programs listed in *Australasian Bandsman* seem conservative and outdated considering that interesting new American popular vogues were available in commercial brass band arrangements, including cake walks, barn dances, two-steps, novelties like *The Whistler and His Dog*, Indian intermezzos, or bright selections from recent musical comedies like *The Spring Chicken*.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore tempting to suggest that remoteness from the overseas stylistic influence that quickly reached the capital cities via the major sea-borne vaudeville circuits and recent musical theatre productions left country bands in a stylistic backwater. Also, it remains a truism that new vogues generally take longer to become established in rural areas, if ever. Yet it would be incautious to make this claim for country banding as a whole because of the vast variation in the geographical and cultural remoteness of towns across Australia at that time.

### Rural Band Activities

The range of activities undertaken by pre-World War One bands seems from *Australasian Bandsman* reports to have been perhaps more varied and interesting than those reported by post-War bands. Besides contest rehearsals, the latter most frequently comprised regular park, shopping centre or racetrack play-outs and, from 1924, radio broadcasts for a select few. From the 1910s amateur bands and individual non-professional members came under pressure from the Musicians' Union of Australia for accepting professional engagements. These were expressly forbidden by the union's Amateur Band Rules and By Laws published in *Australian Band News* in 1915.<sup>17</sup>

This pressure greatly intensified in the interwar period when the union became more influential, and especially during the Great Depression when many thousands of professionals were desperately seeking work.

This practice was, of course, more difficult to police in rural Australia where local band musicians were often one of the few sources of musical talent available to function organisers, entrepreneurs, exhibitors and others. In some circumstances, country banding exposed participants to more professional engagement experience than was available to their city counterparts. Skilled musicians were simply more highly valued (in shorter supply and in greater demand) in remote areas and the remoteness was more profound before motorised road transport became common. Their value diminished during the interwar period as player pianos, radio, electrically recorded discs, musicals on film, and other music or sound technology increasingly displaced live home or public music-making throughout Australia.

The following two band report extracts give some flavour of the variety of engagements undertaken by early town bands:

*We have been very busy of late—played eleven nights for Wests' Pictures, seven nights for Clay's Waxworks, and the show [show grounds] engagements finished a very heavy fortnight. Toowoomba band report: 6 September 1907, p. 33*

*Two days [at the] show: also four days [at the] races within a couple*

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<sup>16</sup> Both titles are advertised in *Australasian Bandsman*, 6 September 1907, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Professional Rule', *Australian Band News*, 15 August 1916, pp. 17-18.

of months. We also supply most of the dance music here... So if the skating ring engage us the coming season and the Star Picture Co. is still the draw...we will have a fairly busy time. Mudgee band report: 1 March 1912, p. 27.

Bands frequently performed in public to raise funds for local hospitals and other charities as a way of giving back to the communities that supported them. They also ran fundraising concerts, dances and other events for their own benefit: to purchase uniforms, new instruments, contesting expenses or whatever else was needed. Cobar town band gave a long, effusive and detailed report on February 7 1908 about their Boxing Night concert.<sup>18</sup> The description evokes a long lost world of pre-mass media community entertainment brought forth by local brass banding culture. Included were a 'descriptive' minstrel sketch *Happy Days in Dixie* by the band, female vocalists, action songs including *The Tall Top Hat* by school children, a clog dance with 'sandpaper and whistling effects', a 'localised' item and a tenor horn solo (both by young boys), a 'fire club' exhibition by 'Australia's champion club swinger', comic music hall songs like *We've Been Touching 'Em Up a Bit*, Mr. T. Goodge's yarn of the *Oozlum Bird*, an Irish recitation, *The Fighting Tailors*, and brass band items. Concerts like this often concluded with a social dance played for by the band.<sup>19</sup>

### Quantification of Pre-World War One Banding

The rural distribution of banding will probably never be comprehensibly quantified retrospectively for many reasons, including the fact that many former rural population centres where band music was once heard have reverted to forest, scrub, or paddocks with perhaps a few brick or iron relics and peppercorn trees or other surviving exotics. Even with regard to existing historical towns, numerous early bands faltered almost without trace or have been more or less ignored by chroniclers of later town band histories as not representing a valid link to the amateur all-brass banding movement history of later years. These might include early local bands with military links; drum and fife or bugle and fife bands; fire brigade, railway, post office, or other civil service associated bands; local Salvation Army or other denomination bands; private bands, works bands, cadet bands, union bands, prison bands, Aboriginal mission or other institutional bands; and many others. Many town bands simply never gained sufficient musical competency, confidence or desire to register for contesting and thereby gain a documented identity in band literature. As the state associations grew in strength, the existence of town bands that did not register was more or less ignored in reports. During World War One it was proposed that even bandsmen killed in action from unregistered bands be excluded from the Bandsmen's Roll of Honor published in *Australian Band News*.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Other band 'playouts' mentioned in this issue of *Australasian Bandsman*, alone, include playing for a political campaign, a boxing tournament, and an axe swinging demonstration; street, park, theatre, showground, and exhibition concerts; concerts with a biograph and 'illustrated songs'; Church of England Market Day; New Year Eve Saturnalia; a Hospital Sunday; a railway employee's picnic; a 'continental'?, 'Eight Hour Sports'?, Friendly Society and other society functions; a rowing club regatta, an Athletic Club Carnival; the Hibernian Sports, a Beach Sports boat excursion; a ball, and street 'carolling'(sic).

<sup>20</sup> 'Bandsmen's Honour Board', *Australian Band News*, 26 September 1915, pp. 2-3.

Nevertheless, individual town band reports, state and regional reports, and other snippets provide some clues about the number of bands that existed in various rural regions before World War One. For example, a 1910 Band Association of New South Wales report cites the number of bands in various regions of NSW that had registered with the association, enabling them to take part in contests carried out under the Association's control. Figures for these affiliated bands alone indicate the strength of country banding at that time, since only 15 of the 85 registered bands were from metropolitan areas.<sup>21</sup>

More is revealed about the density of early town banding through informal reports that focus on a specific rural region. In *Australasian Bandsman* of February 1908, 'Hustler' of Jumbuna town band complains that although there were 'fully twenty decent bands' in the surrounding area of South Gippsland, none had contested at South St. If there were twenty 'decent' bands in this area, one must ask how many less than 'decent' but possibly highly functional town and other bands there might have been in this part of South Gippsland alone. In a March 1912 band report entitled 'Bands in the Wimmera', correspondent 'A.W.P.' begins by noting that 'little, if any, news

is ever reported by bands in the Mallee region of Victoria', but also mentions nine bands in the region.<sup>22</sup> 'Bendigo District Notes' in the same issue of *Australasian Bandsman* mentions 23 bands in a larger but overlapping area.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the apparent strength of banding in this part of Victoria before World War One, the Dimboola band contest of 1928 only included Dimboola, Jeparit and Nhill.<sup>24</sup> An article published much later in *Music Maker* reminds readers that from the 1880s bands were established at Banjerang, Banyena, Boolite, Coromby (district), 'Hopefield'(possibly Horefield), Jung, Kewell, Kirchhelm, Minyip, Rapanyup, and Sheep Hills.<sup>25</sup> Half of these towns appear to have since vanished.<sup>26</sup>

### Warnings of Country Banding Decline

By the post-War period, however, there was a growing awareness that town banding was faltering. Subtle acknowledgment of this came in the September 1925 *Australian Band and Orchestra News* editorial entitled 'Pity the Bandless Towns'. It argues, among other things, that a town that supports a band will flourish and that bandsmen must spread the word that 'the mud oyster sort of town that has no band is not doing the right thing by itself at all'.<sup>27</sup> A June 1928 article on New

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<sup>21</sup> *Australasian Bandsman* April 7 1911, pp. 4-5. Later New South Wales registration figures could not be located but Victorian figures for 1926 list close to half the registered bands as metropolitan. See: 'Present Classification of Bands (Victoria)' *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 February 1927, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Nhill, Horsham, Dimboola, Murtoa, Jeparit, Rainbow, Ararat, Warracknabeal and Echuca Federal band, *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 1 March 1912, pp. 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> Bendigo City, Hopetoun, Flight [?], Echuca Rangers, Echuca Federal, Rainbow, Pyramid Hill, Quambatook, Boort Fire Brigade, Koorong Vale, Manchester Unity (one of several known bands in Eaglehawk), Rochester, Donald and St Arnaud District, Castlemaine Foundry, Mainiter and Watchem (possibly a works band), Inglewood, Wedderburn, Charleton, Wycheproof, Swan Hill, Sea Lake, Kerang, and Raywood.

<sup>24</sup> 'Dimboola Contest: Record Crowd There' *Australasian Band and Orchestra News* November 1928, pp. 27-8.

<sup>25</sup> 'There's no Township at Coromby', *Music Maker*, 20 October 1941, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> They are not indexed in the comprehensive collection of maps in 2003 *Australia Road Atlas* Hema Maps, Eight Mile Plains, Qld.

<sup>27</sup> *Australian Band and Orchestra News* 26 September 1925, p. 1. Note: the *Australian Band and Orchestra News* did not become *Australasian Band and Orchestra News* until 1926]

South Wales bands laments the demise of more than eight South Coast bands (Hawkins 1928, p. 9). An exceptionally lengthy editorial for the January 1930 issue is entitled 'The Towns Where Bands Should Be'.<sup>28</sup> The article cites examples like Gundagai (which had two bands in 1915), Braidwood or Nowra which no longer possessed bands and 'others of the same sort, sizable towns and no bands'.<sup>29</sup> It notes that scores of other towns are in the same plight and 'ought to be ashamed of the open sign of retrogression in the fact that they had a band, but now possess none'. His analysis of the decline of country banding places some of the blame on 'nervous or petulant citizens' who get bands restrained from playing near where they live, bandmasters who fail to train a successor who can hold the band together when the 'master' can no longer continue, the outdated nature and 'terrible sameness' of repertoire like: '*Poet and Peasant*, *William Tell*, the *Gilbert and Sullivan* stuff and fantasias on Scotch, Welsh and Irish, or English airs...'.<sup>30</sup>

The strongest editorial contention in this article is that town banding was in decline because of the reticence of town bands to compete: 'Nothing keeps up the band pride of a town as much as a success or two in contests'. It proposes that a country 'zone' contests system be formulated with regions of about six towns taking it in turn to host annual contests, conceding that some approximation of this idea was already in practice with the Northern Districts

Band Association. A 'zone system', the editorial concludes, 'would be the real salvation of those bands that now totter from a lack of town pride'.<sup>31</sup> In retrospect, however, it is easy to see that the increasingly metropolitan-controlled contesting cult itself ultimately played a role in the decline of town banding culture pride and self-identity.

### Why the Decline?

The growth of town banding culture was part of the late nineteenth century growth of townships or rural regions and their communities. Country banding as a culture shared the particular social and cultural advantages of belonging to a town or regional community. These advantages can (but do not necessarily) include a closer-knit community with a greater sense of common purpose and stronger family structures and ties than metropolitan society. In fact, there is evidence that family membership was an especially strong feature of country banding and also, incidentally, of the travelling circus bands that toured rural areas and influenced country banding (Whiteoak 1999b, pp. 74-76; St Leon, 1983). Numerous documented examples include the five Helm Brothers of Asbury band in the 1880s, the Stools family of Benalla band since the 1890s, Kurri Kurri band with five Coughlan Brothers in the late 1920s, the Brown family's three generations of association with Merewether band by 1936, Narrabri band with six members of the Hulbert family and Dempsey band with six members of the Sands family in the late 1930s.<sup>32</sup> The latter

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<sup>28</sup> *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, January 27, 1930, pp. 1-4.

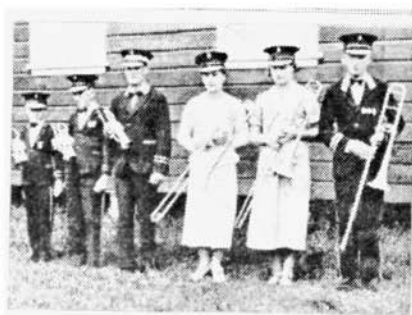
<sup>29</sup> *ibid* p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid* p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* pp. 3-4.

<sup>32</sup> See: 'Band family: Three generations', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 May 1936, p. 6; *100 Years of brass in Benalla: A booklet researching 100 years of brass banding in Benalla's history, 1882-1982*, Benalla Memorial Band (self published by band committee), p. 3; 'Kurri Kurri Brass Band', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 August 1927, p. 19; 'The Hulberts of Narrabri', *Australasian Dance and Brass Band News* 26 March 1938, p. 7; 'Kempsey Silver Band: Six members of one family', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 February 1936, pp. 35-36.

included sisters Connie and Marjorie Sands which highlights another rural survival strategy. Where a dire shortage of players existed in rural areas and musically talented female family members were available, the traditional exclusion of women from brass bands was put aside.<sup>33</sup>



*Sands family members of Kempsey Silver Band. Australasian Band and Orchestra News, February 1936, p. 36 (Stirling Collection)*

The 1890s depression and decline of mining destabilised rural society and accelerated urbanisation just as the all-brass banding cult was first gaining momentum, but the 1914-18 War was nothing less than a disaster for country banding. Loss of band membership through the enlistment of eager, patriotic and often very young bandmen seemed at first the main problem. However, the horrific death toll

and maiming of Australian servicemen shattered many rural communities, especially small tight-knit communities, since these losses were proportionally immense and more apparent than in the metropolises. Many rural bandmen made the 'supreme sacrifice' or were ruined physically or mentally, or both.

The 'Bandmen's Roll of Honor' published in the August 1915 issue of *Australian Band News* names 122 men from the thirteen listed non-metropolitan bands and 20 from only four listed metropolitan bands.<sup>34</sup> Four country bandmen were already listed as dead. The next month's roll listed 62 country bandmen and 21 from metropolitan bands. Of these, four from the country and one from Melbourne were listed dead.<sup>35</sup> The honor roll was discontinued, presumably as too discouraging to the war effort, but town band reports continued to complain about loss of membership. A report from Taralgon band published in the same issue as the first roll of honor list complains of the loss of five players (not mentioned in the roll of honor), including one wounded on the front and one returned sick from Egypt.<sup>36</sup> The following month it was reported that twelve members of Horsham band were at the front. Six of the twelve were killed in action. A letter from J. Pendergast in Egypt dated 18 February 1916 observes that 'the war must effect the bands a lot by the number of bandmen over

<sup>33</sup> They thereby gained a unique opportunity to obtain instrumental brass playing experience which some used to advantage. Three Sands sisters, for example, found work in a theatre orchestra whilst Hilda Tansey, who played in her bandmaster father's band at Beechworth and other towns, formed and led the famous but controversial Sydney Ladies Brass Band in the late 1930s.

<sup>34</sup> 'Bandmen's Roll of Honor' [this is how it is spelt in the source], *Australian Band News*, 26 August 1915, p. 5. Fourteen had enlisted from the two small towns of Jeparit and Daylesford alone, including the Sibertson brothers from the latter. Twenty five men enlisted from St Augustine's band at Geelong, an entire brass band. D. Findlay and D. Smith of Echuca band and V. Holland and J. Helsham of Hopetoun band were listed dead but there is no tally for those already injured.

<sup>35</sup> 'For King and Empire: Bandmen's Roll of Honor', *Australian Band News*, 26 September 1915, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> 'Band Chat', *Australian Band News*, 26 September 1915, p. 3.

here... How are the Gippsland bands progressing now? I have met quite a lot from Sale, Maffra, and Bairnsdale'.<sup>37</sup> A poignant report from Casterton band mentions optimistically that Fred Holmes 'is back with us having done his bit, and has been wounded in the arm. His arm has been partly paralysed... .. notwithstanding his injury, [he somehow manages] to manipulate his trombone, and, as you know, he is "some player"'.<sup>38</sup> The Bairnsdale band correspondent to *Australian Band News* of 28 October 1918 notes that:

*In towns where the residents formerly boasted of two or more [bands], the exigencies of war have reduced [this] to but one band. Bairnsdale, unfortunately, had this experience. Two adult bands, formerly in the full flower of success, went under and not a few of the bandmen have fought and died for the honor [sic] and cause of Empire.*<sup>39</sup>

Post-war reports show that many country bands survived by filling vacancies with boy trainees. Some had reached a very low ebb or folded completely during the war but began to revive by late 1919.<sup>40</sup> By this time, however, strong municipal bands such as Malvern Tramways or Collingwood in Melbourne or Newtown in Sydney were already dominating the higher grades of contests. Municipal bands went from strength to strength in contesting as

returned servicemen began to refill their ranks. Many of those who joined post-war metropolitan bands were former country town bandmen. Maryborough band alone had lost fifteen bandmen to Melbourne bands by 1922.<sup>41</sup>

A contesting grade classification list of Victorian bands published in *Australasian Band and Orchestra News* of February 26 1926 indicates the low contesting status of non-metropolitan bands in Victorian contesting by this time. All D grade classification bands were non-metropolitan.<sup>42</sup>

'D grade' appears to have eventually become synonymous with 'country band grade'.<sup>43</sup> A measure of the cultural cringe that was developing might be seen in the example of Nhill town band. It was promoted to B grade by the Victorian Bands Association in 1929 but its bandmaster immediately requested that it be reverted back to C grade, otherwise, he claimed, it would not be able to contest. He pointed to the way that the Jeparit band 'went to pieces' when it was raised to a higher grade.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to the loss of confidence of country bands, the Melbourne Fire Brigade Band with its relatively unlimited resources, central metropolitan location, and its ability to offer players much coveted positions as firefighters and integrate band activities into its shift system, became virtually unbeatable as Australian A Grade champions in the 1930s.<sup>45</sup> Under the

<sup>37</sup> *Australian Band News*, 26 April 1916, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> 'Casterton Band' *Australian Band News*, 26 June 1918, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> 'Bandsman at the Front', *Australian Band News*, 26 October 1918, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Australian Band News*, 26 August 1919 p. 11; *Australian Band News*, 28 December 1919, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> 'Playing Strength Affected by Departures', *Australian Band News*, 22 May 1922, pp. 11-12.

<sup>42</sup> A Grade: 1 of 7 (St Augustine's Orphanage, Geelong); B Grade: 3 of 10; C Grade: 12 of 23; D Grade: 17 of 17. *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 February 1926, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> An advertisement for the Gunnedah (NSW) band contest states, for example, 'Open to all Country Grade Bands (D Grade)' *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 March 1935, p. 31

<sup>44</sup> 'Nhill Band's Promotion', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 29 October, p. 20

subheading 'Country Bands Go Shy' in a 1934 editorial, it is suggested that country bands were not entering the Sydney contest because they believed the winning metropolitan bands were 'rigged' with professionals just before the contest.<sup>46</sup>

### Distance and Remoteness

Tyranny of distance was always a problem for country contestants, especially their remoteness from the major contests, from the major centres of music activity, culture and musical education, and from the headquarters of banding administration. Travel was often an ordeal for bandsmen in the early years and there are various interesting reports of the trials, tribulations and distances overcome by bands. To participate in the 1900 South Street contest, Bathurst band left on October 1 1900 and arrived at Ballarat five days later. A report from Rushworth in 1908 complains of several travel tribulations. These included having to walk all night after one of the drag horses was affected by the extreme cold, having to contest after a sleepless journey to Bendigo, and 'return[ing] home the next morning—still raining hard, and bitterly cold—just looking like a lot of wet hens'.<sup>47</sup> Over a 12 month period, the Border Brass Band at Corowa (NSW) covered about 300 miles by horse drawn coach on 'almost unimaginably bad roads'.<sup>48</sup> Even in the late 1930s, Coromby band—entirely comprised of wheat farmers—complained of the difficulty of travelling up to ten miles 'on a dark, muddy night, with no other mode of travel but "per

horse," just for the sake of a "blow"'.<sup>49</sup>

There was of course no such problem where train connections could be made, except for the expense and travelling time involved. Travelling conditions may have improved overall with motorised road transport but the problem of the time and expense of travel remained. This was reflected in the small number of country band delegates able to attend state association meetings where influential decisions affecting their regions were being made. For example, the June 14 1935 monthly meeting of the Victorian Bands' League report shows that only nine of the 34 delegates represented country bands.<sup>50</sup> Some of the nine were probably 'stand-ins' following the accepted practice of metropolitan representatives standing in for country delegates who could not get to Melbourne to attend.

### Regionalism

The major strategy for overcoming tyranny of distance and remoteness was for town bands to consolidate and utilise the banding resources of their particular rural district or region. A very early example is the Border Brass Band, which was formed in the 1870s by the residents of towns on opposite sides of the Murray river, Corowa and Waygunyah (Vic.). The formation of 'district bands' to maximise district talent for contesting purposes became very important. In *Australasian Bandsman* of February 7 1908 the Jumbunna (Vic) band correspondent, 'Hustler' enthuses that:

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<sup>45</sup> 'Fire brigade band: Too advanced for judges', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 June 1936 p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 February 1934, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> 'Rushworth', *Australasian Bandsman*, 7 February 1908, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> *Australasian Bandsman*, 2 July 1909, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> 'Coromby band reunion: Wheat farmers enthusiastic', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 March 1932, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Beaman, RJ 'The Victorian Bands' League', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 June 1935, p. 11.

*An idea has firmly become fixed in my brain box that a district contesting band is the only way to really assist the three [under active town bands of the district]. I am satisfied there is sufficient talent here to form a good district band and obtain, say, one professional lesson a week, or engage and find employment for a good conductor who might also obtain one or two of the four bands to teach, apart from the district band.<sup>51</sup>*

The numerous competitions presented by regional, district, or smaller towns were easy to attend for bands in the region or district and, although they lacked the prestige of the South Street, Sydney, or other major contests, they offered the contesting experience and potential success required to climb the state or national contesting ladders.

The strategy of forming regional groups and associations loomed larger in importance as the fortunes of country banding — soon to be further affected by the Great Depression— diminished. The latter subsequently reduced the income of bands, making it harder for them to go to contests, and further destabilised rural band membership as players left their towns to find work. However, editorials, reports and articles rarely name the Depression as the direct cause of banding woes.<sup>52</sup>

The formation of a Northern [Victoria]

Districts Band Association comprising six bands 'with power to add to its member[ship]' was announced in May 26 1928.<sup>53</sup> In 1931 the Western Districts Band Association of New South Wales was formed to, among other things, acknowledge 'the impracticability of country bands competing at metropolitan contests, due to the heavy cost of transport and accommodation, and the restricted opportunities of country bands to build themselves up to the standard of those of the city'.<sup>54</sup> But state organisations viewed the country band associations with jealousy and suspicion, and as rivals to their authority. They instead promoted the idea of the zoning or 'group' system to help country bands in which the 'Groups' would remain firmly under the control of the metropolitan-based state bodies.

### The Groups

In 1934 the Band Association of New South Wales unanimously recommended the adoption of the Group system of banding and a proposal by J. H. Hawkins to create 14 New South Wales banding zones was published in *Australasian Band and Orchestra News* of September 26 1934.<sup>55</sup> Groups were also initiated in Victoria by the state body, the Victorian Bands' League. The Gippsland Group of the Victorian Bands' League was established in early 1936 and ran a seemingly successful contest and a massed bands recital at Warragul

<sup>51</sup> 'Jumbunna', *Australasian Bandsman*, 7 February 1908, p. 19.

<sup>52</sup> Even before the onset of the Depression Murwillumbah band complained that they had lost five successive euphonium players who had left due to 'uncertainty of employment' in the town. *Australasian Band and Orchestra News* 26 August 1927, p. 16.

<sup>53</sup> These were the Fifth Cavalry Band at Echuca, and Deniliquin, Kerang, Cohuna, Kyabram and Rochester town bands. 'Northern Victoria bands: New Association formed', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 May 1928, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Prichard, R, 'Western Districts Band Association of N.S.W: Not Keen on the "Group" Idea', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 October 1934, p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> 'Sydney jottings: The Group System of Bands', p. 18. However, it is not clear how many groups were actually formed in New South Wales apart from the Newcastle and Suburban District Band Group.

in mid-February of that year and a similarly successful massed bands recital at Sale on March 1.<sup>56</sup> A Western District Group, initially comprising six bands and covering an area or zone roughly from Casterton to Colac, was formed in July 1936 and their scheduled activities included a Group tour of regional towns with massed band performances, an annual group 'Band Month' festival each January with a contest and Queen of Queens crowning, as well as various other Group contests.<sup>57</sup>

In other words, country bands in the principal banding state, Victoria, had been led to accept all aspects of the 'zoning system' advocated in the January 1930 editorial of *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*—on the terms of the state body. In March 1936, Mr. Schilling, secretary of the Gippsland Group, appealed to the metropolitan bands to 'give country bands all the assistance they could to further the interests of banding in the country' and 'trusted' that metropolitan bands would demonstrate their willingness to assist by competing in the Warragul contest in November.<sup>58</sup> Several did attend and the contest was reported as a considerable success.<sup>59</sup> However, acknowledgment of problems with the Group system came

the following March with the headline 'Group Secretary Resigns: Complains of Band Apathy'.<sup>60</sup> The same page also contains a report of the cancellation of two country contests, Stawell and Cowes on Phillip Island for lack of entrants. Group contests and other Group events continued but successive reports suggest that these became repetitive and incestuous, with the same few bands meeting over and over again to do the same things.<sup>61</sup> Some Group events are reported as very successful but there is, in the literature, an underlying sense of doom, gloom and misfortune largely absent from earlier band literature. By the end of that year the contingencies of war had brought Australian amateur banding almost to a halt.

### **The General Decline of Brass Banding**

The decline of country banding from the 1910s needs, finally, to be seen in the context of the broader decline of all-brass band music in Australia over the same period.<sup>62</sup>

The sound and sight of the all-brass or 'silver band' was aligned with mainstream popular taste until the 1920s. The association of the brass band and its music with militarism is one important reason for its popularity.

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<sup>56</sup> *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 February 1936, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> These bands were Warrnambool, Portland, Colac (2 bands), Terang and Heywood. 'Group System in Victoria', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 27 July 1936, pp. 19-20.

<sup>58</sup> *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 March 1936, p. 39.

<sup>59</sup> 'Gippsland contest: Warragul Group event success', *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 November 1936, p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Secretary H. Schilling complains in this article of the apathy of the Gippsland Group bands in their failure to support a planned Warragul carnival and contest. *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 March 1937, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> One of the important Group activities, the staging of massed bands recitals, can be a musically unsatisfying experience. Players are often mustered into formation after having to wait interminably in outdoor conditions. Massed performances can also sound atrociously uncoordinated with (as I personally recall) less visible players often not even bothering to contribute to the disorienting mass of sound being created. One report complains of leading players just faking their parts by ear and about others who were not handed music to read.

<sup>62</sup> I have discussed important aspects of this decline in other publications (Whiteoak 1999a; Whiteoak 2000; Whiteoak 2003) and therefore a brief summary will suffice here.

The brass band became a craze over the same period (1850-1910s) that the reputation of the British military was transformed from that of 'rapacious and licentious soldiery to that of the soldier as popular hero,' (MacKenzie 1991, p. 1). The popularity of militarism manifested itself in all sorts of ways, including music hall songs, and Australian adoration of public military displays and military band concerts before and during World War One.

Early brass banding in Australia was, as already indicated, often explicitly linked to military service banding. Brass bandsmen adopted a quasi-military ethos and became quasi-military in their appearance, demeanor, willingness to obey strict rules and regulations, and in the vast repertoire of marches with military or militaristic titles that they played. The brass band on the march became a stirring simulacrum of the military band. The public enjoyed the military-like (or machine-like) rhythmic precision and 'ring' of brass band music, and quickstep (playing on the march) competitions enjoyed quite remarkable popularity as a quasi-military outdoor public spectacle long after more general Australian public interest in brass band music was waning. Respect for the Australian serviceman survived the horrors, losses and military follies of World War One but enthusiasm for militarism in popular music was somewhat dampened, and challenged by the lightness, brightness, and less inhibited sound of Jazz Age syncopated dance music played by modern American-style dance bands.

With the onset of the 1920s jazz age in Australia, all-brass arrangements of the latest hits in syncopated Tin Pan Alley dance music were readily available and

performed in public. However, by the mid-1920s it was clear to the public that amateur brass band-trained musicians generally lacked the ability to interpret and embellish the new syncopated music correctly. Nor could an all-brass band produce the right sounds. The wailing saxophone solo, the crisply propulsive tenor banjo, the 'oriental' reed and brass tonal combinations and the exciting reed and brass section antiphony of jazz age dance orchestra music were all missing. From 1936 the popularity of 'sweet' and 'hot' swing music consolidated the public's understanding that brass band music was popular music of a long past era (Whiteoak 2002, pp. 27-48).

New music technology made brass band music seem even more anachronistic. The band microphone gave rise to palais and cabaret crooning from 1933. From 1935, guitar amplification added an exciting new sound dimension to Australian popular music. Because of their tremendous carrying power, brass bands had always played a major function in attracting public attention and patrons to public events, circuses and other theatrical entertainments, land sales, recruiting drives and so forth. They were also ideal for noisy outdoor venues, such as fairgrounds or racetracks, and could fill large expanses of parkland or seaside recreation areas with promenade music. However, public address systems were installed in public and commercial outdoor venues from the late 1920s. Bands began to be replaced by recorded music, thereby further diminishing their public profile. (Lubin & Whiteoak 2003, p. 46). The band movement was aghast in 1935 when the Returned & Services League proposed replacing bands with pre-recorded music for the Anzac Day

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<sup>63</sup> 'Their imagination is not in step' (editorial) *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 February 1935, p. 1.

march.<sup>63</sup>

The banding movement had, in fact, already distanced itself significantly from popular taste through its determination to raise brass band music to the level of 'art music'. It is not at all surprising that enthusiastic and talented bandsmen wished to identify with music that was more challenging than that enjoyed by the general public. A pre-1910s manifestation of this desire was their taste for band transcriptions of Wagner's music, a taste generally not shared by their public. During the 1920s, specially written test pieces such as Percy Fletcher's tone poem *Labor and Love*, which creatively explored the all-brass sound and its technical possibilities, were introduced into Australian contesting. Such works required many months of serious and highly detailed (phrase by phrase) practice but held little appeal for the general public. To accommodate this deliberate shift toward art music aesthetics, the movement had to become more inward looking and to some extent turn its back on 'the people' and their current taste. Neither the 'bandsmen of the future' (boy bandsmen) movement instigated in the late 1920s, nor controversial moves to accept women into banding in the late 1930s, succeeded in stemming the general decline in banding and its popularity (Whiteoak 2003, p. 93, Whiteoak 2002, pp. 46-48).

In 1937 *Australasian Band and Orchestra News* was renamed *Australasian Dance and Brass Band*

*News* and its brass band content was increasingly displaced by swing band news and relegated to a section called 'Victorian Brass Band News' (which included interstate news). A September 1938 article entitled 'Brass Bandsmen: Are They Apathetic' notes that 'Swing is certainly taking a firm grip at the moment...' but it blames apathy on behalf of the banding movement and its organisers for the loss of control of the journal.<sup>64</sup> Discouraging headlines in the August to November 1939 issues of the journal (its final issues) reflect the rapidly failing confidence of the band movement as war contingencies added to its woes.<sup>65</sup> Victorian and Queensland state bodies cancelled their state contests but the Sydney contest went ahead and was a flop. The great era of all-brass banding had well and truly cadenced.

## Conclusion

*Firstly let me say that, in my opinion, the apathy shown by the public in general to good band music is really amazing, especially in the country.*

From 'The Moans of a Country Band Master' *Australian Music Maker* July 1937, p. 49

The holy grail of contesting was ultimately a poison chalice for country banding. The decline of country banding was—as much as anything—a decline of spirit: the inevitable loss of belief that non-metropolitan bands could rise above the lower grades, even though this occasionally occurred in the

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<sup>64</sup> *Australasian Band and Orchestra News*, 26 September 1938, p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> 'Albury town band: Serious discontent in the ranks', 27 March, p. 23; 'Forsaken Brass for Swing', 26 August 1939, p. 21; 'No financial backing for Sydney Band Contests', October 1939, p. 24; 'Attendance disappoints at V.B.L.'s Annual Music Festival: Precautionary measure against lean times ahead', October 1939, p. 15; 'Military calls up major Queensland bands!', 26 October 1939, p. 21; 'Apathetic attitude is serious menace', 27 November 1939, p. 13; 'Newcastle fiasco...', 27 November 1939, p. 21; 'S. A. Cricket Assoc. cold shouldered bandsmen!', 27 November 1939, pp. 27-8 (all of these are in *Australasian Dance and Brass Band News*).

interwar period.<sup>66</sup> Country banding once had produced many outstanding contest winning bands, such as the mining region bands that dominated South Street from 1901-5. It had also, in some respects, created a culturally level playing field for the inhabitants of remote towns and regions in the years before radio and other technology mediated musical entertainment were available, since brass band music was once modern popular music. Country banding came, however, to define itself and be defined most starkly as the vulnerable, underprivileged relative of metropolitan banding—the loser in a binary relationship between country and metropolitan banding. By the 1930s, it was locked or looped permanently into an uneven power relationship with the control and codification-obsessed state bodies. The level playing field of all-brass band uniformity and codification was not level for those disadvantaged by distance, remoteness, vulnerability to economic misfortune, and population size. Some very small towns struggled to uphold their town band, but they were clearly disadvantaged. Attempts by regions to have their own voice and improve their lot by forming autonomous regional associations appear to have been discouraged and overridden by the two most powerful state bodies. Since success in banding movement terms could only ever be proven by cups, medals and higher grading, the more ordinary day-to-day musical, cultural, educational and social benefits that accrued from town banding came to be less and less appreciated. Communities were naturally supportive and proud of a contest winning town band, but what of the band that failed to bring

home a trophy year after year because of situational disadvantages? Moreover, all-brass band music became less and less aligned with the popular taste of even the most remote rural areas. By the 1930s, country people in parts of Australia could, if they had access to a radio, keep in touch with the very latest in popular music, including hot and sweet swing, crooners and a musical genre that—while not even being British in origin—had lyrics that related more closely to the lives and surroundings of many rural dwellers: the genre now known as country music.

Country banding did not end in 1939. The role of the brass band in rural society remained diminished overall, and suffered further cultural and social setbacks with the 1950s rise of youth counterculture. Yet—as in the case of the present-day Warragul band mentioned at the beginning of this article—the old spirit of country banding is sometimes brought back to life through the inspiration and determination of capable figures who, by serendipity, live in the same town or region and share a similar passion for banding and what they believe it can give to both themselves and their rural community. The most recent issue of *Australia's Band World* carries several inspiring accounts that indicate a modest resurgence of banding in the country.<sup>67</sup>

### Acknowledgments

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<sup>66</sup> One example was Hamilton band's surprise A grade win at the 1937 Newcastle contest. 'Hamilton has a win at Newcastle', *Australasian Dance and Brass Band News*, 26 February 1937, pp. 8-9

<sup>67</sup> Chris Earl 'Entries galore for 94<sup>th</sup> trip to the Barrossa' Chris Earl 'Gunnedah and Jason Katsikaris: Hot Stuff' and Chris Earl 'A Mad Day at Swan Hill' (7) October 2003, p. 3; p13 and p. 17 respectively.

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**Dr. John Whiteoak** is a musicologist, music historian, and a research associate in the School of Music at Monash University. He is author of a history of improvisatory music in Australia and co-editor of the *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia* (2003). He has been a member of several Australian champion brass bands and, in the 1980s, he helped to re-establish the Healesville town band (now a concert band).