



# More than a Life: John Meredith: and the Fight for Australian Tradition

*Keith McKenry*

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## **More than a Life: John Meredith: and the Fight for Australian Tradition** Keith McKenry

John Meredith (1920-2001) was, for decades, the leading warrior in the fight to collect, preserve, and celebrate Australia's unique folk music heritage. Between 1953 and 1994, he recorded, from ordinary Australians, thousands of songs, tunes, recitations, folk medicines, superstitions, sayings, and yarns, documenting a rich canon of traditional lore which, at the time, few believed (and many denied) existed. He was also a key pioneer in folk song performance, establishing, in 1952, the original Bushwhackers Band and performing in the landmark Australian musical *Reedy River*. A political radical throughout the Cold War years, he fought all his life against poverty, cultural toadyism, and official indifference. Writing or co-authoring many books on Australian tradition and history - including the classic *Folk Songs of Australia* and *the Men and Women Who Sang Them*, still easily the most important single volume in the field - he achieved official recognition late in life, when his original field recordings became an acknowledged national treasure. Unlike, however, the great song collectors in other English-speaking countries, he did not have the benefit of a good education, let alone formal musical training, for he was forced by poverty to leave school at age 14 at the height of the Great Depression. In 1944, having neither qualifications nor prospects, John Meredith mounted his pushbike and left the New South Wales township of Holbrook, where he was born, and rode into the sunrise, determined to make his fortune. This is John Meredith's story. Also included is a CD containing the cream of Meredith's field recordings, together with classical performances by leading Australian and international folk singers. \*\*\* "Few traditional singers, and even fewer field collectors, have their life stories published...this book is more than just a biography of the person who is unquestionably the most important song collector in Australia in the Anglophone tradition." - *Journal of Folklore Research*, April 2015

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