

THE ORIGIN OF THE ASHES

*Which came first —
The urn or the velvet bag?*

By
Rex Harcourt

Cover photo:

The Ashes urn and velvet bag are permanently on display at the Marylebone Cricket Club Museum, Lord's, London.

Opposite:

Rex Harcourt is the former Research Librarian for the Melbourne Cricket Club at the MCC Library where he still is very active.

A graduate of Melbourne University's Commerce Faculty, he was Director of Research and Planning with the Department of Civil Aviation prior to his retirement in 1980.

Photo by Erin O'Brien.

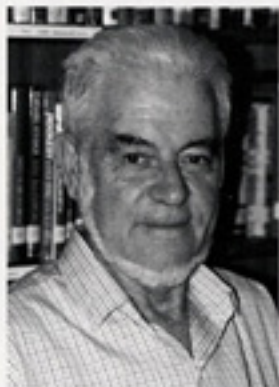
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Introduction



The general perception has been that the Ashes symbols (the urn and the velvet bag), which are permanently housed at Lord's Museum, must have originated in England.

Over the last 10 to 20 years researchers have contradicted this popular view and have clearly shown that the Ashes urn was created in Melbourne and the velvet bag in Sydney – thus the central symbols of supremacy in Anglo-Australian contests originated in Australia.



The momentum generated by these revelations has encouraged local researchers and public historians to publicise the facts by way of publications and ceremonial commemorations of the original events. This has been especially so at Sunbury where the town has adopted the motto "The birthplace of the Ashes", and has developed impressive street logos at the entrances to the town and other strategic places. In 1995 a commemorative Australia v England cricket match between Allan Border's and David Gower's XIs was staged at Sunbury, and the "Rupertswood" estate and mansion are being developed, inter alia, into an Ashes-related museum and surrounds.

Although significant progress has been made, there are still a lot of minor loose ends which required further study – especially on the question of whether the urn or the velvet bag was created first.

Whilst the main purpose of this bulletin is to focus on that question, there are other Ashes-related facts and items of interest, particularly in relation to material available or displayed at the MCG. Therefore this bulletin is presented in two parts – Part A dealing with the events of 1882-83 and Part B covering developments subsequent to 1883. It should be noted that this paper is not a complete account of the origin of the Ashes, so a reading list is included at the end of the bulletin.

It is hoped that this bulletin will not only assist researchers to delve more deeply into cricket history but will also attract others to begin the fascinating pursuit of cricket research.

The MCC Library will welcome any comments and, especially, new knowledge on this topic.



Part A: Which Came First- The Urn Or The Velvet Bag?

The story of the origin of the Ashes can be simplified into two basic versions¹ of the events surrounding the creation of the Ashes urn and the accompanying velvet bag. The first version involves the events at Sunbury as outlined in Joy Munns' book *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, and the second as contained in Jack Pollard's *Australian Cricket – The Game and The Players*. The main purpose of this paper is to re-examine the events from late 1882 until the middle of February 1883 with a view to synchronising both versions into a single story.

Both accounts are in agreement that the Ashes urn was created at Rupertswood mansion in Sunbury, and that a velvet bag which was made by Mrs. Anne Fletcher, wife of the Secretary of the Paddington Cricket Club, was presented to the English captain, Ivo Bligh, in Sydney after the deciding "Test"² which ended on 30 January 1883.

The Sunbury version claims that the urn was created at a social function at Rupertswood on 24 December 1882, whereas Pollard asserts that it was not presented to Ivo Bligh until February 1883 – that is, after Mrs. Fletcher had presented her bag in Sydney. Furthermore Pollard claims that the velvet bag contained the ashes of a bail used in the deciding Test. This study therefore concentrates on the timing of the two presentations and whether the bag was ever intended to be the receptacle for some form of ashes.

Quite apart from the relative merits of the two versions, popular perception and custom look on the urn as the appropriate receptacle for ashes of this type, so the main focus has been, and always will be, on the urn rather than the bag as the symbol of the heart and soul of the Ashes. Accordingly, the community at Sunbury can justifiably claim the title of "Birthplace of the Ashes" for their town.

In the modern era, the Ashes urn and velvet bag have been accorded an aura of sanctity by the cricketing world, being referred to in terms such as "sacred", "hallowed", "the heart and soul of the Anglo-Australian contests" and kept in

¹ Other versions are dealt with briefly in Part B

² The term "Test Matches" was not part of the language of cricket until 1894–95 when it was introduced to describe bona fide Anglo-Australian contests, and the match of August 1882 was then designated as the ninth Test and only the second played in England.

the "Holy of Holies at Lord's". The two items are securely housed in a locked, glass display case in the museum at Lord's, are rarely taken from there and only once brought to Australia, and then under Royal bodyguard. This aura of sanctity was certainly not present at the time of their creation. In fact the very opposite attitude prevailed. For a proper understanding of the question of their origin, it is important to appreciate the attitudes of the time of their creation, and how these have changed over the years.

Originally, in the 1880s the Ashes had no aura of sanctity, but were the embodiment of a frivolous act and the topic for parodies such as were popular in English music halls. Current political issues, news items, events, and personalities were frequently the subject for pun-infested parodies sung to the tunes of popular melodies by the leading comedians of the day. Such public entertainment was so popular that newspapers, magazines and people at social gatherings eagerly engaged in this form of good-humoured banter, which has since completely disappeared from the public scene.

However in the 1880s it was only to be expected that happenings on the cricket arena should, from time to time, be expressed in this favourite form and, when England lost its cricket supremacy to Australia, the music hall fever ran riot. In Australia the English captain, Ivo Bligh, joined in with the frivolity, but put it aside when the serious business of playing Test cricket was on the agenda. In the circumstances of the time, it is highly probable that Bligh gave not the slightest thought of taking the Ashes urn with him when the team travelled to Sydney and Brisbane, but probably left it with the ladies at Rupertswood until his return. There are even some hints suggesting that he did not take the urn with him when he returned to England after the 1882-83 tour.

While it is easy to forget the lighter side of the creation of the Ashes symbols, it can completely distort the picture if the frivolous aspect is replaced by the sanctity which they generate today. After all, if the Sunbury version is correct, which seems likely, then the urn was created before the start of the first Test of 1882-83, so it was then a meaningless symbol, the significance of which would have disappeared if Australia had later won the series.

The concept of the "Ashes" emerged out of England's shock defeat by the Australians at the Oval on 29 August 1882. Two days later, *Cricket: A Weekly Record of The Game* magazine published a parody describing the defeat by using the names of the English cricketers in the form of a series of puns.

It was headed "Sacred to the memory of England's supremacy in the cricket field at the Oval", and so was in the form of an obituary notice. It was signed G.H.H. whose identity is not known. The fact that it was issued so soon after the end of the match, and that the result was hanging in the balance right to the finish, suggests that it was hastily prepared in order to meet the magazine's deadline for publication.

A more imaginative, and superbly designed, obituary notice by Reginald Brooks appeared in the *Sporting Times* of 2 September. At the time, cremation was yet to be legalised and was the subject of lively political debate, so Brooks' assertion that "the body will be cremated and taken to Australia" injected a provocative note into the widespread state of shock in the English cricketing world. The obituary notice was prominently displayed (albeit in a magazine almost entirely devoted to horse racing) and had abandoned the style of a parody, so it was not unlike any obituary notice published in modern times. Brooks also had the advantage of a few extra days to prepare it, and to ensure that it had a prominent position in the paper.

These may be the reasons why the obituary notice in *Cricket* has faded into the background, and only the notice in the *Sporting Times* is usually referred to when the subject of the Ashes is raised.

Cricket obituary

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
ENGLAND'S SUPREMACY IN THE
CRICKET - FIELD,
WHICH EXPIRED
ON THE 29th DAY OF AUGUST, AT THE OVAL.
"ITS END WAS DEATH."

If you "Read" and "Study" carefully the account of the match, you will "Bar low" language and take our defeat with "Grace," and we shall "Lose as" sportsmen by so doing. The Australians have certainly the "U," yet we cannot raise our "Horn by" trying to "Blot" the credit due to our opponents. Indeed, we show "Loyal ton" by so doing, and shall look the more foolish if some day they should re-"Pease" their performance.
G. H. H.

"Peace, another great success."—Spof-
forth, Oval, August 29, 1882.

Sporting Times obituary

In Affectionate Remembrance
OF
ENGLISH CRICKET,
WHICH DIED AT THE OVAL
ON
29th AUGUST, 1882,
Deeply lamented by a large circle of sorrowing
friends and acquaintances.
R. I. P.

N.B.—The body will be cremated and the
ashes taken to Australia.

At that time, cricket tours were almost continuous, so within weeks after the "Ashes Test" Ivo Bligh's English team was in Australia to play a series of three Tests. By the time they reached Australia, news of the Ashes and the mock obituary notices had become a popular topic of conversation and the subject of good-humoured banter wherever the English team went. *Melbourne Punch* magazine delighted in publishing parodies about cricket events and the Ashes.

Sir William Clarke, who was then President of the MCC, was in England with his family until September 1882 and was largely responsible for arranging an English team to tour Australia. His counterpart in Australia was Frank Grey Smith, the President of the Victorian Cricketers' Association and Vice-President of the MCC, who arranged the itinerary and schedule of matches. The Secretary of the MCC, Major Ben Wardill, was tour manager for the Englishmen, so there was a strong MCC presence in the planning and execution of the tour.

In addition, the English team travelled to Australia on the *Peshawar* with the Clarke family group, and strong friendly relations developed. These were continued whenever the English team was in Victoria.

Before playing the first Test at the MCG, the amateurs of Bligh's team were lavishly entertained on 24 December 1882 at "Rupertswood", the palatial and manor-like home of Sir William Clarke at Sunbury. In her diary Lady Clarke recorded that a social cricket match was played, followed by a grand dinner and dancing in the Clarke's impressive ballroom.

According to the Clarke family's version of events handed down over the years, Lady Clarke and Florence Morphy, who was music teacher to the Clarkes' children,³ arranged for a cricket item to be burnt and the ashes placed in a small ceramic urn, which was then light-heartedly presented to Ivo Bligh.

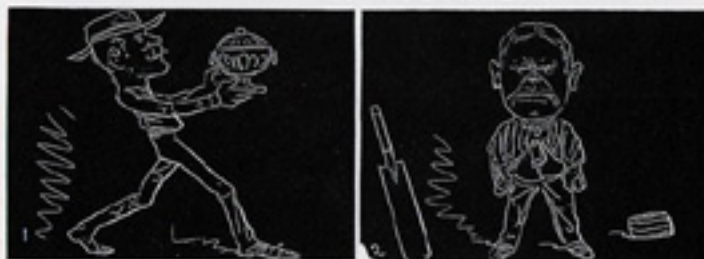
The probable sequence of events was that Lady Clarke, who was the dignified head of the household acting as hostess at a very important function, summoned the head butler to arrange for the small ceramic urn to be located, then emptied of its contents (was it perfume?) for a cricket item to be burnt, and the ashes placed in the urn. In turn, the head butler would have instructed some of the lesser staff to carry out the tasks – the maid to fetch the urn and one of the ground staff to burn the cricket item. In the story passed on to the

³ Florence Morphy was a talented musician and the sheet music of one of her compositions – the waltz "Neath Southern Skies" – is held in the MCC Museum. It was used as background music in the A.B.C. video *Origin of the Ashes* (Melbourne:ABC, 1995)

Clarke children a difference of opinion arose as to whether the item burnt was a bail or the cover of an old cricket ball.⁴

When the Englishmen left Melbourne⁵, both teams had won a Test, so the third Test in Sydney (26–30 January 1883) was to be the decider. Even before that match had started, *Melbourne Punch* featured a cartoon with Ivo Bligh holding an ashes urn, thereby suggesting that the urn had already been presented to Bligh. England won that deciding Test and so, in theory, earned the right to reclaim the Ashes. It was then that Mrs. Fletcher in Sydney made the velvet bag and presented it to Bligh.

ENGLAND V. AUSTRALIA.



1. IVO and the ashes. Paraphrase required.

2. BEN. ALEC. BARNHEIM.—"Wait till to-morrow noon, and then see who's best; they won't haul me again in a hurry."

It is not clear how and when the velvet bag was given to Bligh. Pollard claims that it was at the Fletchers' home on 30 January, the day the third Test ended. This could hardly have been the case because the match did not finish until into the afternoon, and later that day the English team sailed for Brisbane. Furthermore, if handed to him personally, there was no need for a letter of thanks from Bligh. But on his return to Sydney, Bligh wrote to Mrs. Fletcher from the Australia Club and headed his letter "Friday morning" which most probably was 16 February. After expressing his gratitude for the velvet bag, he stated that "the ashes shall be consigned to it forthwith" thus indicating that there were no ashes in the bag at the time and that some ashes already

⁴ Sir William Clarke's eldest son Clive claimed that it was the cover of a cricket ball, but his younger brother Russell thought it was a ball.

⁵ The then Secretary of the MCC, Major Ben Wardill, traveled with the English team as their manager in Australia.

existed and these could only have been those created at Rupertswood.⁶ It thus appears that the velvet bag was given to Bligh (or left for him) sometime between the end of January and 16 February.

On 1 February *Melbourne Punch* had published in the best tradition of music hall parodies a six verse poem to be sung to the tune of "Who's at the window?".⁷

The fourth verse of the poem read:

*"When Ivo goes back with the urn, the urn;
Studds, Steel, Read, and Tylecote return, return;
The welkin will ring loud,
The great crowd will feel proud,
Seeing Barlow and Bates with the urn, the urn;
And the rest coming home with the urn."*

This pointed and repeated reference to *the urn* virtually confirms that it had already been created and presented to Bligh earlier than 1 February. Unlike the notice in the English magazine *Cricket*, this poem needed a longer lead time for its preparation, so it was probably written close to 30 January when the deciding Test concluded. Again this supports the Clarke family's version of events.⁸

A copy of the above verse was cut out of *Punch* and attached to the urn, probably by the ladies at Rupertswood where Bligh had left it while he travelled to Sydney and Brisbane. It is still attached to the urn.

In later years the Fletcher family claimed that the velvet bag was made prior to the creation of the Ashes urn, but no reliable evidence can be found to support their claim. Furthermore the size of the bag, and the fact that it was loosely tied with a threaded lace, as well as the tenor of Bligh's letter and the poem in *Punch*, all seem to negate their argument.

It could have transpired that Mr. Fletcher, who was the manager of the NSW team for the annual inter-colonial cricket match at the MCG just before the

⁶ An alternative explanation could be that Bligh was given the ball(s) from the Sydney Test with the intention of burning it (them) but later gave the ball(s) to the Clarks. Sir William Clarke's grandson, Michael, still has a paper knife made from a ball used in the deciding Test in Sydney.

⁷ The complete poem is given at the end of this bulletin.

⁸ It is of interest to note that immediately below the poem was an advertisement for "Johnston's Matured Sunbury Wines" from 15/6d. a dozen.

staging of the first Test, was a guest of the Clarkes on 24 December. If so, he would have witnessed the presentation of the urn. Then on his return to Sydney he could have arranged for his wife to make an embroidered velvet bag large enough to hold the urn.

This view is supported by Dr. Philip Mosely in his short biographical sketch on J.W.Fletcher:⁹

"It is likely that John Walter (Fletcher) procured the measurements of the Ashes urn for Anne to sew the velvet bag. He met the English at a banquet at the conclusion of the inter-colonial match on 29 December 1882.¹⁰ In addition, Fletcher's presence in Melbourne at the time would have permitted him to make contact with people intent on establishing soccer in Victoria ... Victoria's first (soccer) club (was) formed three months after (his) visit and ... the first inter-colonial series (was played) six months later in Melbourne."

If the velvet bag had been designed simply to hold the ashes of a burnt bail or bails, then it would have been much smaller, about the size and shape of a small pin cushion, and completely sealed to preserve the contents. In addition, Bligh in his letter to Mrs. Fletcher stated that the ashes would be placed in the velvet bag. There is no evidence to hand which supports Pollard's assertion that the ashes of a bail(s) from the deciding Test were placed in the velvet bag and later transferred to the Ashes urn when the English team finally returned to Melbourne.¹¹

This examination of available evidence clarifies the Sunbury version as the most probable and logical and, until evidence is produced to the contrary, full support must be given to the Rupertswood events rather than the Fletchers' velvet bag having been created first with the ashes of a burnt bail (or bails) in it.

⁹ Mosely, Philip. "Father of Australian Soccer: John Walter Fletcher 1847-1918" in *Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH) Bulletin*, no.23 December 1995.

¹⁰ Mosely may have confused his dates. The inter-colonial match finished on 29 December, but the banquet was held on 24 December. According to Mosely, Mrs. Fletcher's maiden name was Clarke, so she may have been related to Sir William and this "would make it even more likely that John Walter Fletcher was at Rupertswood and hence privy to everything which went on there". However there is no evidence of the family connection.

¹¹ If further proof is needed, then the Marylebone Cricket Club could be approached to test whether any ashes had been in the bag.

Part B – Subsequent Developments

During the 1882–83 tour Ivo Bligh became engaged to Florence Morphy,¹² and in 1884 returned to marry her at St. Mary's Church, Sunbury, with the wedding reception being held at Rupertswood. After their honeymoon the couple resided at "Hazelwell", 121 Powlett Street, East Melbourne, where the Ashes symbols were probably displayed in a prominent place, not as symbols of cricket supremacy between England, but as a reminder of their courtship days in Melbourne.¹³ In time, the couple returned to England, Ivo inherited the family title and the pair became Lord and Lady Darnley with the Ashes kept on the mantelpiece at Cobham Hall in Surrey. After the death of Lord Darnley, Florence presented the Ashes symbols to the MCC at Lord's.

The Centenary Of The Ashes Tour — 1982–83

The English tour of Australia in 1982–83 celebrated the centenary of the creation of the Ashes. It was therefore thought appropriate to hold a commemorative public function symbolising the original events at Rupertswood in December 1882.

The fourth Test in that series from 26–30 December at the MCG created an enormous amount of interest and excitement at a time when many were questioning whether one day cricket would take over from Test cricket. Towards the conclusion of the match Australia needed 74 for victory when Jeff Thomson joined Allan Border with only one wicket to fall. In the next 128 minutes the pair added 70 runs before Thomson was dismissed by a freak catch in slips, and England had won by three runs thus equalling the lowest-ever winning margin in Test cricket history.



¹² See Clarke, Michael *Clarke of Rupertswood Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 1995, p 186.*

¹³ In 1883 Bligh had been made a life member of the Melbourne Cricket Club but there is no record of his having played cricket in Melbourne during his residence at "Hazelwell" which was only 650 metres from the MCG. See *The Age*, 31 Jan 1994.

There were some unusual, unplanned features in that commemorative match, some of which were strikingly similar to the Centenary Test in March 1977 at the MCG.

In the latter case the winning margin was exactly the same as the original match of 1877, and in both matches one of Australia's opening batsmen was badly injured and had to "retire hurt". In the Ashes commemoration match the winning margins were very similar. The results were in the balance right to the end, and the atmosphere was nail-biting amongst the onlookers.¹⁴

After the December 1982 match, the bails were retained with the intention of ceremonially burning them on the MCG arena during the interval of the WSC match to be played on 23 January 1983. Arrangements were also in train with the Sunbury Lions Club to have a similar ceremony at Sunbury. Both these functions were thwarted by a severe bushfire season which culminated in Ash Wednesday and the Mt. Macedon disasters, thus causing the government to proclaim a complete ban on lighting fires in the open as had been planned. In these circumstances it was strangely symbolic that during the Mt. Macedon fires, the strong north wind blew burnt gum leaves and the arena of the MCG was strewn with hundreds of them. So it was an unplanned act of nature which provided the centenary symbol.

Also at the time the Melbourne Cricket Club Library volunteers arranged for an obituary type notice to be published in *'The Age'* on 1 January 1983, stressing that the sport of cricket was not dead but the *'Sporting Times'* was.



¹⁴ Tom Horan, one of Australia's leading players on the 1882 tour of England, sent regular reports which were published in *The Australasian* newspaper. His first hand description of the Ashes Test (which is reproduced in Crowley, Brian M. and Mullins, Pat *Cradle Days of Australian Cricket: an anthology of the writings of Felix (T.P.Horan)*). South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1989, captures the emotion and mounting drama of the final day's play and its immediate aftermath.

One treasured exhibit in the MCC Pavilion's Museum is the Blackham Ball which is mounted on an impressive wooden stand with "Spofforth's hand" holding the ball at the apex of the display. The ball is the one used in the famous Ashes match at The Oval in August 1882 where Blackham had been the Australian wicketkeeper and had kept the ball after the last English wicket had fallen.

During the 1915-16 season interstate cricket was abandoned on account of the Great War, and in its place the MCC arranged charity matches to raise money for the Victorian Sick and Wounded Soldiers' Fund over the Christmas-New Year period.

As part of the fund raising, items of cricket memorabilia were donated for auction to boost the proceeds. Included among these were the ball which Blackham had retained from the Ashes Test, and the Australian scorebook of 1882 which covered the Ashes Test.

The auction of the ball raised £617, then a world record price for a cricket ball, and the scorebook sold for 33 guineas to Mr. Millear, an MCC member. This score book had been printed by Scott and Boyle of Bourke Street, the forerunners to the Melbourne Sports Depot. In the modern era before the establishment of the cricket museum at the MCG, the Millear family donated the scorebook to the Marylebone Club at Lord's. It was this scorebook which was borrowed from Lord's in 1994 for display in Melbourne's Museum during the 1993-94 season.

Other versions of the origin of the Ashes include a plaque in the Checkers room of the Jolimont Hilton Hotel, not far from the MCG. The hotel now stands on the site of the former *Cliveden Mansions* which was the city residence of the Clarke family. Their case rests on the chance that the urn was created at Cliveden rather than Rupertswood, but this is dispelled by the fact that Cliveden was not built until 1887 – four years after the original sequence of events.



On 20 December 1995 the North Melbourne Cricket Club, one of the main instigators of the Hilton plaque, provided a plaque at Rupertswood to "correct" the error that was made with the original memento.

In England in 1954, Wisden published a version which is rather scanty and appears to be a brief outline of events prepared by Lady Darnley (originally Florence Morphy) many years afterwards. It is compatible, but not completely at one, with the Sunbury version.



Above:

The Blackham Ball from the historic August 28th and 29th 1882 Test match at The Oval, won by Australia, resides in the Melbourne Cricket Club Museum. *Photo by Erin O'Brien*

Cinders And Ashes At Sunbury



On Thursday May 27th, 1993, steam locomotive R707 *City of Melbourne* led an excursion train past *Rupertswood*, the former property of MCC President (1880–86) Sir William Clarke at Sunbury.

R707 was built in 1951 by the North British Locomotive Company for the Victorian Railways; with the support of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen, it was restored in 1980–85 and is operated and maintained by 707 Operations.

In the 1995 Ashes celebration match, players and guests travelled from Melbourne to Sunbury on a similar train.

Photo by MCC Library Volunteer Alf Batchelder

References & Notes

- For an in-depth appreciation of the origin of the Ashes, Ronald Willis' *Cricket's Biggest Mystery – The Ashes* (1987) and Joy Munns' *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* ([s.l.]: The Author, 1994) are the most thorough.
- For a concise appraisal of the events, the differing versions and a detailed summary table of Anglo-Australian Ashes contests, see the entry in *Oxford Companion to Australian Cricket* (Sydney: Oxford University Press 1996). In the same publication, the entry on the Australian team colours outlines how green and gold were adopted in 1899, and prior to then varied from tour to tour. In 1882 the Australians adopted the colours of the 96th Regiment – red, yellow and black.
- The Pollard version of events is outlined in several of his books on cricket and is summarised in the 'Ashes' entry of his *Australian Cricket – The Game and The Players* (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton 1982).
- Two videos produced in 1995, the ABC's *Origin of the Ashes* and the MCC's *Interview with Michael Clarke* provide valuable information, perspectives and visual appreciations.
- Michael Clarke's *Clarke of Rupertswood 1831–97: the life and times of William John Clarke, First Baronet of Rupertswood* (1995) provides an informative and thought-provoking insight into the character of Sir William Clarke and the household at Rupertswood.

WHO'S ON THE CRICKET FIELD?

TUNE: "*Who's at the Window?*"

Who's on the cricket field, who, who?
Who's on the cricket field, who, who?
Who but brave Ivo Bligh,
Come here boldly to try
To claim the blue ribbon anew, anew.
To claim the blue ribbon anew.

With him come his comrades to help, to help;
With willow and leather to help, to help;
And as he has well won,
So each man has well done
His best and his smartest to skelp, to skelp.
The army of Murdoch to skelp.

Oh, great Mother England, hurrah, hurrah!
Our famous Old England, hurrah, hurrah!
We true children of thine,
Must not fret when you shine;
P'r'aps our blow needs a blow on the raw, the raw.
A few gentle raps on the raw.

When Ivo goes back with the urn, the urn;
Studds, Steel, Read and Tylecote return, return;
The welkin will ring loud,
The great crowd will feel proud,
Seeing Barlow and Bates with the urn, the urn;
And the rest coming home with the urn.

Australians a humbling have got—a lot;
For the four-million loan didn't float—bad lot!
At finance and cricket
We're dreadfully "licked;"
Debentures, unsaleable lot, won't float,
While Barlow and Bates found "the spot."

But comfort, great Murdoch, your day, your day,
Is not over yet, not for aye, for aye;
You have had a good inning,
Full many a time winning;
Now frankly to Ivo give way, give way,
While his brows get a turn of the bay!