

The diaries of Joseph Jenkins

Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 13267

Acquired 1997

From time to time the musical lilt of Welsh voices drifts up towards the decorative ceilings of State Library Victoria's La Trobe Gallery, the home of the manuscripts team. The *geiriau* (words) spoken belong to Joseph Jenkins, better known to Australian history buffs as the 'Welsh Swagman'.

Jenkins was born in 1818 in Ceredigion, Mid Wales, to a family of poets and farmers.¹ He followed in his forebears' footsteps until, plagued by personal strife, he set off for the distant shores of Australia at the unlikely age of 51. After arriving in Port Melbourne in 1869, Jenkins meticulously recorded his life as an itinerant labourer and new Victorian. Across 25 diaries (1869–94),² he documented everything from the exorbitant price of a cabbage in drought-stricken 1860s Melbourne to the latest news about bushranger Ned Kelly, and his belief in Aboriginal land rights.

Jenkins, a native Welsh speaker, kept his diaries mainly in English, as they offered him an opportunity to practise his written expression in this less familiar language. But he regularly peppers his texts with poems and notes written in his mother tongue, and in the 1870s and 1880s won recognition at Ballarat eisteddfods for recitations of his *englynion* (Welsh poetry).

Extracts from Jenkins' Australian diaries were published by his grandson William Evans in 1975 and went into several reprints, but in more recent times slipped off the cultural radar. An enthusiastic team of translators from the South Caulfield Community House Welsh-language group is now transcribing Jenkins' words for new audiences. This team is building on the work of dedicated volunteers at the State Library who have typed up a monumental 725,000 words from 15 diaries.

Jenkins always intended his diaries to be part of the historic record. One of his first acts on arrival in Australia was to entrust his shipboard diary to a man who could deliver it to his family in Wales, 'so that someone will have the chance to know how I fared as an antipodean'.

It is fitting that diaries of Joseph Jenkins have now been digitised by the Library. Once transcription and translation are complete, all parts of the diaries will be available in English 'across the town and country' – or *a'i lais dros wlad a thref*, as Jenkins put it in one of his poems.³



I Mr Thomas James
Belmore

G Cyomo Serial glau
 Myafethof, lon li oluz
 Nio gwicicobh yu fy ophlan
 Mae hyn i bawt yu awluz
 G wr Ptefuan fel amuthan
 Cyomo ag garoh yu of
 Mae arawon yu Sdadkewu
 Sti lais des wlad a Phup

Mae'i wrothly teirion all
 yu clawp ei deloioni
 Mawr glau, cawr di gall
 lona'i wraig ar reb cogoi
 Dewi mawr fferyg yllor faw
 Gwel dduwys ei dlostru
 Sypu a wifael, dui wrth can
 A gait en llwm deloioni

Above left: Diary of Joseph Jenkins, vol. 15, 1 January – 30 December 1885

Above right: 'To Mr Thomas James', Poem by Joseph Jenkins from vol. 1 of his diaries, 24 March 1869 – 31 December 1871, p. 10

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