

THE MAN AND THE WOMAN AND THE EDISON PHONOGRAPH

As a child I was fascinated by a photo from the family collection in an old shoebox. The elderly, dignified Aboriginal woman sings into a large brass trumpet attached to an Edison phonograph, while a distinguished gentleman dusts the loose wax off the cylinder with a fine brush. I knew the man was Horace Watson, my great-grandfather and the woman was someone called Fanny Cochrane Smith. But it wasn't until I saw it in the Tasmanian Museum that I realised how Australia's history reverberates through this picture. It is the story of cultural contact, genocide and reconciliation, of tradition and modernity. It is the act of folklore collection at its most poignant. The photo was taken on October 8th 1903 – exactly 100 years ago.



Fanny Cochrane was born in Wybaleena on Flinders Island in 1834, not long after her parents and around 120 original Tasmanians were 'settled' there. Her mother Tanganuturra, known as Sarah, formed a life-long relationship with Nicermanic, whom she met there. Tanganuturra also had some children to a white sealer.

As the first child born in the settlement, young Fanny learnt songs and culture from all over Tasmania.

She was taken from her family at the age of seven to live in various homes and institutions. She ended up as a maid, in virtual slavery, to a teacher of religion who is reputed to have treated her appallingly.



By 1847 the notorious settlement at Wybaleena was closed down and the 30 or so surviving Tasmanians were moved to Oyster Cove, between Hobart and Cygnet. These included Truganini, Tanganuturra, Nicermanic and Fanny.

In 1854 Fanny married William Smith, a relatively educated ex-convict. For many years they ran a boarding house in Hobart, before moving to Nicholls Rivulet near Oyster Cove, where she was granted 100 acres. As a convert to Methodism, she donated some of her land for the building of a church (a rare case of giving land to whites, rather the having it expropriated).

Yet she kept close ties with her people, including Truganini, who taught her bushcraft and with whom she would fish, hunt and collect bush tucker and medicinal herbs. She would also adorn her Edwardian dresses with traditional accessories. Likewise, she reconciled her traditional spirituality with Christianity and was a bridge between two cultures.

When Truganini died in 1876, Fanny Cochrane Smith claimed to be the last Tasmanian Aborigine. This set off spurious pseudo-scientific attempts to establish if this was the case, or whether she was, in the language of the day, a half-caste. Scientists took samples of her hair, examined photographs and took measurements. The community was bitterly divided. Yet official records, contemporary witnesses, Fanny's own testimony and her parents' claims concur that her father was indeed Nicermanic and not a white sealer.

Although in popular consciousness Truganini was, and still is known as the last Tasmanian, the government controversially granted Fanny a life pension of £50, and full title to 300 acres, perhaps through a sense of guilt. With Truganini gone, for most white Tasmanians, the Aboriginal 'problem' was no longer an issue. Fanny's claimed Aboriginality undermined this reassuring assumption.

Even Fanny's descendents cannot agree on this matter. And there are many, as she and William Smith had eleven children. Some proudly believe they are descended from the last full-blood Tasmanian, while others maintain with equal fervour that aboriginality resides in identity, and not just DNA.





Horace Watson was born in Bendigo shortly after his parents migrated from Leicestershire in 1852. He married Louisa Keen, daughter to the man who invented Keens Curry near Hobart around 1860 (no connection with Keens Mustard of London). Louisa was wealthy from an earlier marriage to a man 50 years her senior who had died shortly after. Within the year she married Horace Watson and they shared her inherited mansion 'Barton Hall' in Sandy Bay. Horace took over the curry business, and after years of hard work, had time to devote to broader interests. He travelled widely, and amassed an impressive collection of Aboriginal and Islander artefacts.

One evening in 1899, Horace attended a concert of by Fanny Cochrane Smith singing traditional songs. He was so impressed that he decided to make phonograph recordings of the songs.

There were two recording sessions, the first of which was made in the rooms of the Royal Society, in 1899, followed by sessions in 1903 at Barton Hall, where the photo was taken.

This was cutting-edge technology. Horace was one of the first people ever to use recording equipment in Australia, pre-dating even the trailblazing composer and musicologist, Percy Grainger. The wax cylinders of the phonograph were cut by a needle attached directly to the brass trumpet that received the sound.

Despite the scratchiness of the recordings, translations of the words have been made, and the language preserved in them has helped reconstruct a Tasmanian language. Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have studied the melodic structure of the songs in an effort to understand Tasmanian pre-history, and its links to mainland cultures.

And now, if you visit the Tasmanian Museum in Hobart, amongst a display of artefacts collected by Horace, is a copy of the photo of the recording session, and a push button which replays some of the recordings. It reveals Fanny's high-pitched, rhythmic singing. On one of the recordings she introduces herself and says hauntingly: "I am the last of the Tasmanians." For me, this chilling sound bite is accompanied by the unique experience of hearing my great grandfather's voice from well beyond the grave, sounding disarmingly like my father!

When I recorded the song based on this story I was able to include snippets of speech and song from Horace's original Edison cylinders, with the blessing of Fanny's great grandchildren.

Fanny Cochrane Smith died in 1905, and is believed to have been buried secretly, to avoid the desecration that happened to so many of her people. Horace Watson died 1930. The recipe for Keens Curry, which had been passed down secretly for three generations, was sold to the makers of Keens Mustard. Barton Hall is gone, the Sandy Bay Macdonalds now stands on the site.

I wrote a song about this story in 1999 and included it on my album *Out My Window*. Some years later, Graham MacDonald of the National Folk Festival in Canberra told me I should look out for a musician called Ronnie Summers from Cape Barren Island. Ronnie was in a band called The Island Coes. He is descended from Fanny Cochrane Smith.

To cut a long story short, we met and got on like a house on fire – it was as if we had 100 years of catching up to do! In 2005 at another National Folk Festival we performed the song together several times, culminating in an extremely moving performance at the final concert in the Budawang. As we sang the final words of the song the gasps from the huge audience were audible. The ovation seemed to go on forever, and I don't know how many people told us that they cried.

One of my children said that Ronnie and I are related by song. That lovely phrase goes some way to capturing the magic of the two of us coming together around music, singing about our forebears doing exactly the same thing over 100 years before.

Since then Ronnie and I have been able to get together and sing the song on a few occasions. Again repeating history with a twist, we have recorded the song together, and it is available on my 2010 album, *Balance*, as well as on a CD accompanying Ronnie's book, *Tasmanian Songman Ronnie*.



BRUCE WATSON