

In his introduction to the 2002 reprint of D'Arcy Niland's book, *The Shiralee* (originally published in 1955), Les Murray comments that when the book was first issued the word *shiralee* had little currency in Australia and abroad, but at the same time it had appeal because it sounded 'exotic or plausible'.<sup>1</sup> A quick Internet search today reveals that not much has changed. The melodious *shiralee* has surprisingly few occurrences. While most Internet sites use the word in reference to D'Arcy Niland's book and the subsequent movies and television series, other sites reveal the appeal of the word as a name for a backpacker hostel, a group of holiday cottages on Norfolk Island, and a craft group, apart from its use as a female first name, most importantly a prizewinning Basset Hound.

First captured in print in 1892 in the phrase 'drop in his shiralee and water bag by him',<sup>2</sup> the word *shiralee*, at that time, was evidently a receptacle for a swagman's possessions. S J Baker documents *shiralee* in his book *Australian Language* (1945), where it occurs in the middle of a list of similar words: *drum, swag, bundle, curse, matilda, shiralee, parcel, turkey, donkey, national debt* and *bluey*. Significantly, Baker includes alongside *shiralee* the comment that its origin is unknown. Ten years later in D'Arcy Niland's *The Shiralee*, the word is used metaphorically in reference to the child, Buster; she is a *shiralee*, a physical and psychological burden for her father, Jim Macauley, an itinerant worker. While the sole use of the word *shiralee* occurs around three-quarters of the way

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<sup>1</sup> D'Arcy Niland, *The Shiralee*, Melbourne: Bolinda Softcovers, 2002, .vi

<sup>2</sup> *Australian National Dictionary*, W S Ramson ed., Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988

through the book, readers have been alerted to the word and its meaning in the verse from Ruth Park's 'The Ballad of the Shiralee' that prefaces the text: 'And from his shoulder drops the swag, /The shiralee, the tether, /That through the cruel, stumbling day /Drove all his bones together'. Here the word *shiralee* refers to a physical object, the swagman's bundle that has caused him great discomfort throughout the day. In theme and plot Niland extends this literal meaning for *shiralee* to connote a psychological burden for his main character, Jim Macauley. If we consider S J Baker's list again we can see that some words, such as *bundle* and *swag*, simply denote the object, while others, such as *curse* and *national debt* carry negative connotations. Nevertheless, Baker makes no suggestion that the word *shiralee* carries any meaning beyond that of a bundle, yet ten years later the word had taken on an extension of meaning. What we may ask ourselves is whether the connotation of 'burden', either actual or metaphorical, is a connotation that existed in *shiralee* outside of Niland's book. The point is, that this extended meaning arising from the book has not only gained currency but generated fanciful speculation as to the origin of the word *shiralee*: a British movie Internet site, quoting from George Perry's synopsis of the 1957 movie, claims that 'The child is the "shiralee" an aboriginal word meaning 'burden'. Aboriginal origin for this word has never been proposed in lexicographical circles.

Les Murray speculates on the 'odd beginnings' of *shiralee*, suggesting, but not asserting 'Gypsy, perhaps, or Irish origin' for the word. The Irish connection is promising because of D'Arcy Niland's background, (his father was Irish) and the number of Irish related words and phrases in *The Shiralee*. The book is peppered with Irish idioms, such as the

use of the preposition ‘on’, e.g. ‘the mood was on Macauley again’, when standard English would have ‘Macauley was in a mood again that day’; the use of the definite article where standard English would omit it, e.g. ‘...she was just the rancy-tancy one for the refinement and culture’; ‘she’s a bit heavy with the cold’ (also evident here is the word *heavy* meaning ‘sleepy’ that matches Irish *trom* that denotes both ‘heavy’ and ‘sleepy’); the term ‘in it’ to mean ‘in existence’, a calque from Irish *ann*, meaning ‘there’, but also ‘in existence’ e.g. ‘there’s only two in it, you and my mate here’. Other Irish connections are the word *powtering*, that may be from Irish *pótaireacht* meaning ‘drunkenness’ and the Irish word *gob* ‘beak’ used in English slang as a word for ‘mouth’.

In 1892 the word *shiralee* was applied to an object, a swag. However, just as the word *didgeridoo*, used for an object, may have originally been one associated with a person (Irish *dúdaire dubh* ‘black trumpeter’), the word *shiralee* may be the Irish word *tiarálaí* in disguise. *Tiarálaí* is pronounced ‘cheer-awe-lee’. Irish lexicographer Niall Ó Dónaill<sup>3</sup> translates it as ‘toiler, slogger’. The stem word is *tiaráil* ‘act of toiling, slogging; laborious work’. The related *tiargálaí* is translated as ‘preparatory labourer’, ‘pioneer’. We can see that this word is used for the literal act of breaking new ground as well as the figurative sense of leading the way. The Irish speakers who arrived in Australia in the 1850s would have included some who took to the roads in search of gold, traveling far and wide as a result, and if unsuccessful on the gold fields needing to earn a living some other way. Coming from a rural background, with perhaps few skills other

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<sup>3</sup> Niall Ó Dónaill, *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, Baile Átha Cliath (Dublin): Oifig an tSoláthair, 1977

than those of manual labour, an Irishman could find work as a *tiarálaí*, a manual labourer, on a farm or in a shearing shed. The swag he carried may have been distinctive, and in time the *tiarálaí* may have been recognized for this particular kind of swag, leading to the transference of the word *shiralee* from a person to an object. Of course the swag may not have been any different to that of another itinerant rural worker, and the transference may have come about because over time our knowledge of the person behind the object became distorted. Our modern concept of a swagman is not usually one of him at work. We have a mental image of him on the road, carrying a swag, but we seldom think about what lies at the end of the road: a place of work to earn a living. In nineteenth century Australia, itinerant workers did the hard physical work of shearing, fruit picking, fence-mending and digging. Because they were itinerant they carried their possessions on their backs. Carrying the swag was a signifier of the itinerant worker. The word *shiralee*, then, is more likely to have started out as the Irish word *tiarálaí*, a word for a person and later became transferred to an object, the swag. The proposal of Irish *tiarálaí* as an origin for *shiralee* is plausible and ultimately satisfying in solving the mystery of this appealing Australian English word.