

# The Man and the Woman and the Edison Phonograph: Race, History and Technology through Song

*Bruce Watson*



**Figure 1. Fanny Cochrane Smith and Horace Watson**  
Personal collection, Muriel Watson

As a young child I was fascinated by this photograph. The elderly, dignified Aboriginal woman singing into a large brass horn attached to an Edison phonograph, while a distinguished gentleman dusts the loose wax off the cylinder with a fine brush. The photo was taken on October 10th 1903 at Barton Hall in Sandy Bay, a suburb of Hobart, Tasmania.

The woman is Fanny Cochrane Smith. The man is Horace Watson.

But it wasn't until, as an adult, I saw the photo in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery that I realised just how extraordinary it is. Tasmania's and Australia's history reverberate through it. It is the story of cultural contact, genocide and reconciliation, of tradition and modernity. And it is the act of folklore collection at its most poignant.

This is the story of these two people, their lives and their legacies. It is also the story of the legacy of the event depicted in the photograph and its meanings beyond these two people.

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Fanny Cochrane was born in Wybalenna on Flinders Island in early December 1834, not long after her parents and around 130 original Tasmanians were persuaded to settle there by George Augustus Robinson. Her mother Tanganuturra, known as Sarah, formed a life-long relationship with Nicermanic, whom she met there.

Fanny Cochrane was the first child born at the Wybalenna settlement, and that put her in a unique position. As a youngster she learnt songs, stories and culture from the different language groups across Tasmania. But of course her life was not easy. She was taken from her family at the age of seven to live in various homes and institutions. These included the Queen's Orphan School in Hobart, where children were sent to learn domestic service skills and were subjected to prison-like discipline.

At the age of 12 she worked in virtual slavery as a maid in the Flinders Island home of the catechist Robert Clark, whose wife is said to have given Fanny her surname, Cochrane. Clark treated her with appalling neglect and brutality. She attempted to burn down his home. An official investigation into allegations of cruelty by Clark to children in his care (another of whom was Mathina), found he had 'on several occasions chained and flogged Fanny Cochrane'.

The settlement of Wybalenna was a forlorn place. The displaced Tasmanians would stare across the water to their home. They died at an alarming rate. They died because their connection to country had been severed, and from pneumonia and other diseases incubated in their cold, damp, dark stone cottages – not unlike prison cells.

By the time Fanny Cochrane reached her early teens the population at Wybalenna had plummeted to less than 50. In 1847, those who survived were moved to Oyster Cove, 30 kilometres south of Hobart. These included Truganini, Tanganuturra, Nicermanic and Fanny.

On 27 October 1854 Fanny married William Smith, an English sawyer and ex-convict transported for stealing a donkey. For many years they ran a boarding house in Hobart, before moving to Nicholls Rivulet near Oyster Cove, where she was granted 100 acres. Fanny raised their six boys and five girls in a simple wooden house. The family grew their own produce but their income came from timber; Fanny worked in the bush splitting shingles and carried them out herself. She would walk 50 km to Hobart for supplies.



**Figure 2. Fanny and William Smith with two of their sons**  
Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office



**Figure 3. Fanny Cochrane Smith wearing shell necklace and belt with furs**  
Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts,  
Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office

As a convert to Methodism, she hosted church services in her kitchen until she donated some of her land for the building of a church, an act of generosity that constituted rare case of an Aboriginal person giving land to whites, rather the having it expropriated. One of their sons became a lay preacher and she was active in fundraising and hosted the annual Methodist picnic. She was known for her generosity and culinary skills, with people travelling long distances to sample her cooking.

Through all of this, Fanny Cochrane Smith 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 – shell necklaces, feathers and animal furs. Likewise, she reconciled her traditional spirituality with Christianity and was a bridge between two cultures. Reconciliation personified.

When Truganini died in 1876, Fanny Cochrane Smith claimed to be the last Tasmanian. This set off spurious pseudo-scientific attempts to establish if this was really 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 facial measurements. The

community was bitterly divided. Yet official records, contemporary witnesses, Fanny's own testimony and her parents' claims all concur that her father was indeed Nicermanic and not a white sealer.

In popular consciousness Truganini was, and still is, known as the last Tasmanian. Her passing was announced as "the death of the last Tasmanian". The books could be closed on this shameful episode in our history. Fanny Cochrane Smith's resolute claims about her racial identity undermined this reassuring assumption. Parliament recognised her claim in 1882 and the government granted Fanny a life pension of £50, and full title to 300 acres, perhaps through a sense of guilt. Despite this, with Truganini gone, for most white Tasmanians, the Aboriginal 'problem' was no longer an issue. Historians and Tasmanian society have had a blind regarding Fanny Cochrane Smith's status.

At that time Europeans conceived Aboriginality differently from today, where we understand aboriginality to reside in identity and community acceptance – and not just DNA. That thinking was behind the concept of 'breeding out' Aboriginality, and was the underlying rationale for the Stolen Generations. Over 10,000 Tasmanians identify as Aboriginal today.

In her later years she was conscious that she was the last person on earth who knew the language, songs and stories of her people. This is a situation that has played itself out across Australia again and again in the decades since – and continues to this day. Fanny Cochrane Smith's reaction was to share her culture by giving recitals of traditional songs, stories and dance across the state.

**TEMPERANCE HALL.**  
**MONDAY NIGHT.**  
—  
**BENEFIT**  
**To MRS. FANNY COCHRANE SMITH**  
**(The Last of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Race),**  
—  
**60 Magnificent Limelight Views of Tasmania, Australia, and South Sea Blacks. Unique Collection of Native Weapons. Instrumental Items by the following:— Messrs. Cripps and Gray's Imperial Orchestra; M. Vincent, E. Midwood, P. Henry; Misses Cripps and Duggan.**  
—  
**MRS. FANNY COCHRANE SMITH**  
**Will sing in the Aboriginal Tongue.**  
—  
**SCHOOL CHILDREN should not miss this opportunity.**  
—  
**ADMISSION—6d.; Reserved, 1s.**  
—  
**Commence at 8 o'clock.**

**Figure 4. Advertisement for Fanny Cochrane Smith performance**  
The Mercury (Hobart) Saturday 28 October 1899

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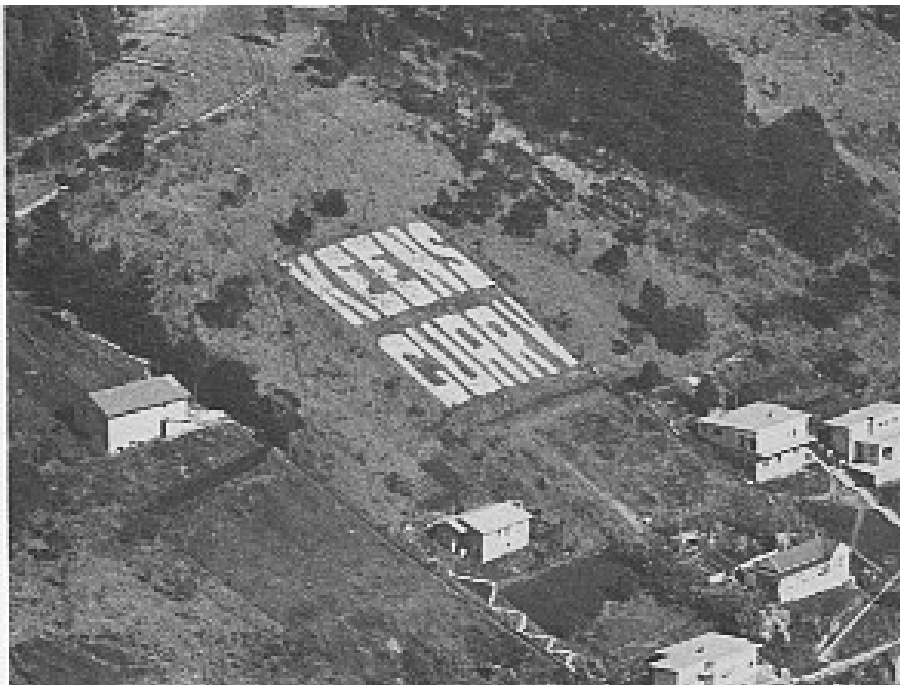


**Figure 5. Horace Watson at a Keen family wedding around 1897**

The man in the photo is Horace Watson. He was born in Bendigo in 1862. His father was a builder who migrated from Leicestershire to Adelaide in 1852, his mother was from Sussex. He became a pharmacist, and married Louisa Keen, daughter of the man who invented Keens Curry in Kingston near Hobart in the 1860s (no connection with Keens Mustard of London). Louisa had been briefly married to a wealthy and much older man. They shared her inherited mansion 'Barton Hall' in Sandy Bay. A life more different from that of Wybalenna can hardly be imagined.

Watson took over the curry business. He was quite the entrepreneur. One of his marketing strategies was to purchase land in the foothills of Mount Wellington overlooking Hobart and transform it into a huge advertising sign. He collected rocks, arranged and painted them white to form the words 'Keens Curry' in 15 meter high letters. It certainly generated controversy, with threats of injunctions by those who felt it defaced their city. The question was even hotly debated in Parliament. Watson defended his right to advertise on his own property – and won. The sign is still there – periodically rearranged to comment on the politics of the day ("Fred's Folly", "No Dams",

"Gunns Lie"). In another unusual marketing strategy, Horace once organized for some curry to be placed on a ship bound for Antarctica so he could claim that Keens Curry was the first curry in the Antarctic!



**Figure 6. Early photo of Keens Curry sign**

After years of hard work, he found time to devote to broader interests. He was the first person in Tasmania to extract eggs from a platypus. He established a girls' prize for science at Collegiate School. He travelled widely, and amassed an impressive collection of Aboriginal and Islander artefacts.

One evening in 1899, he attended one of Fanny Cochrane Smith's concerts. He was so impressed, and conscious of the historical moment, 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 of Tasmania in 1899, followed by sessions in 1903 at Barton Hall, where the photo was taken.

This was cutting-edge technology. Horace Watson was one of the first people ever to use recording equipment for documentary purposes, 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 horn that received the sound. Despite the scratchiness of the recordings, translations of the words have been made, and the language preserved in them has been a major resource used in the reconstruction of a Tasmanian language called palawa kani.

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, you will see a beautifully revitalized exhibit illustrating traditional Tasmanian culture, craft and history. Amongst the displays is a photo of the recording session, and a push button (actually an Edison cylinder) 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'm Fanny Smith. I was born on Flinders Island. I am the last of the Tasmanians."

As historian Martin Thomas observes, "The racial 'purity' or otherwise of Fanny Cochrane Smith is irrelevant when you hear her voice. Its long endurance makes a point about culture, since it demonstrates that language, song and tradition have a fluidity and yet a resilience that belie the fantasy that genealogy is only a matter of blood."

And despite poignancy and historical importance of the recordings, there are strong signs that the recording session itself was fun. In 1909 H B Ritz wrote of Fanny Cochrane Smith and Horace Watson that "on one occasion she was delighted to please him by singing two native songs with a phonograph." And Watson himself says on one of the cylinder recordings, "This record was made for me by Fanny Smith in 1903. We had a real excellent time here."

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Fanny Cochrane Smith died in 1905, two years after the recordings were made. Her funeral cortège was followed by more than 400 people. She was buried secretly to avoid the desecration that happened to so many of her people. Her children's grandchildren and great-grandchildren make up a large proportion of the current Tasmanian Aboriginal population. The church built on her land at Nicholls Rivulet is now a museum in her honour.

Horace Watson died 1930. The recipe for Keens Curry, which had been passed down secretly for three generations, was sold in 1954 to Reckitt and Colman Australia Ltd, which had long been the manufacturers of a different product, Keens Mustard. They didn't like Keens Curry being owned by an independent company. The stately mansion, Barton Hall, is gone. On the site in Sandy Bay there now stands a MacDonaldis.

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Now, the story of two more people a century later.

Horace Watson was my great-grandfather. The photograph I used to take out of the shoe box and look at as a child was taken on the same day as the one in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, but it is a different photo. My father had early memories of meeting him at Barton Hall.

As a songwriter, I wanted to tell the story in song of these two people and what their lives and the historical moment represented in the photo represents. And I wanted to capture the way music can bridge the gulf between people and cultures and across time.



I wrote the song in 1999 and included it on my album *Out My Window*. Some years later I was performing at the National Folk Festival in Canberra and I was told to look out for a musician called Ronnie Summers from Cape Barren Island, in a band called The Island Coes. His great-great-great-grandmother was Fanny Cochrane Smith.

It would be a cliché to say 'the rest is history.' In fact, the rest is history repeating itself with a double twist and pike! We met that weekend and have become firm friends. It was as if we had 100 years of catching up to do! In 2005 at another National Folk Festival we adapted the words of the song to sing as a duet and performed it at the final concert before an audience of 4,000 people. As we sang the final words of the song, revealing our relationships to Fanny and Horace, the gasps from the huge audience were audible.

Ronnie says, "It was the most overwhelming thing I've ever done in me life, when I sang the song with Bruce Watson. I'll never go through something like that again, I don't reckon. And everybody heard it in my voice. And when I looked up, we was playing to about thousands of people and I reckon half of 'em was cryin' and that made me worse. . . It was very emotional that last night on stage before all them people . . . there was a special feeling, like a bonding, among all those people."

The ovation and the emotional catharsis just powered over us. This reaction was repeated at the Association for the Study of Literature, Environment and Culture — Australia and New Zealand's conference in October 2010.

One of my children has said that Ronnie and I are related by song. That phrase goes some way to capturing the magic of the two of us coming together around music, singing about our forebears doing the same thing over 100 years before. The circle of history was completed when we recorded the song together (with twenty-first century digital technology, of course) in 2009. This version appears on my album *Balance*.

And I'd have to say, we had a real excellent time!



**Figure 6. Ronnie Summers and Bruce Watson singing together**

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## THE MAN AND THE WOMAN AND THE EDISON PHONOGRAPH

- (Bruce) There's a photo on a wall in a museum in Hobart  
It was taken in October of 1903  
Of a woman and a man with an Edison phonograph  
Recording her songs of the land and the sea  
There's a button on the wall there next to the photo  
If you press it you can hear the ghosts of her songs  
As they echo through the halls of that museum in Hobart  
A scratchy reminder of all we've done wrong.
- (Both) *Chorus:*  
The man and the woman and the Edison phonograph  
Salvaging pieces of song  
White man's black cylinder, the story of progress  
The song lives on, but the singers are gone
- (Ronnie) Not yet 50 years since white man first settled  
She was born on an island in Bass Strait's cruel seas,  
Where the few who remained of our people were herded  
And left there to die of despair and disease  
And at seven she was taken from her mother and family  
To work as a servant and be taught about God  
But she still learnt the old ways, the songs and the stories  
And with dear Truganini she'd go bush for food  
  
And after Truganini, the scientists descended  
Was Fanny Smith now the last of her race?  
The futile debates it seemed never ended  
As they took her dimensions and examined the shape of her face.
- (Both) *Chorus*
- (Bruce) And the man in the photo was born to an immigrant  
He married a woman of inherited wealth  
And he lived in a mansion overlooking the harbour  
Worked hard for their business, did well for himself  
And in time he became a gentleman of leisure  
He developed an interest in the native folks' ways  
He collected and catalogued those cultural treasures  
Archived and referenced for future display  
  
He was a member of the Royal Society  
Propertied wealth, a man of propriety
- (Ronnie) She and her people were torn from their land  
Betrayed, dislocated, dissected – according to plan,
- (Both) But they came together through song
- (Both) *Chorus*
- (Bruce) There's a photo on a wall in a museum in Hobart  
It was taken in October of 1903  
Of a man and a woman and an Edison phonograph  
Recording her songs of the land and the sea  
  
And the man had a son, who in turn had a son  
Who in turn had a son, who was me
- (Ronnie) And the woman had a son, who in turn had a daughter  
Who in turn had a son, who in turn had a son  
And the next one was me