

TOMMY BEST'S COFFIN

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Many strange things I've read in my time,
And many queer subjects I've put into rhyme;
But the one I'll now tell of, beats all ever I've read -
A man ordering his coffin before he is dead.

Robert 'Billy' Barlow.

Come, if you will, to the Western District of Victoria in the middle of the 1850s. Portland is celebrating its 20th birthday. The Henty family still rule supreme in the town they founded clandestinely two years before Melbourne was established. The hard times of the economic depression of the 1840s are nothing but a memory and things are looking good for the squatters and those who supply them.

Thirty five miles north of Portland is the recently named and surveyed town of Branxholme. Almost buried in trees, it is supplied with good water from a tea-tree-lined creek. Formerly it was called Arrandoovong, after the creek, or Best's or Tommy Best's Crossing after the hero of our story. Branxholme has been home to Thomas Best and his family for about ten years now. They had arrived in the middle of 1845, taking over The Traveller's Rest, a handy inn on the road between Portland and Hamilton. A few years later Thomas sold out to a Mr Kent but continued to live in the area. Kent proved to be a bad choice, he never paid for the hotel. He bolted from the Western District in 1849 with most of the inhabitants baying for his blood.

Thomas returned to the hotel, and we find him there in 1853 (or thereabouts) when a death occurs in Branxholme. The body is in want of a coffin, and Thomas, formerly a blacksmith and wheelwright in Portland, offers his services. With no local timber-yard, he is forced to ride to Lyne Station on horseback for the wood. Lyne is some miles from Branxholme and by the time he returns with the planks, their sharp edges have badly galled his legs. It is some time before the bruises and abrasions heal.

"No one will have the same trouble over my coffin," he vows, "when I go to Portland I shall have one made." He fails to mention this decision to his wife, Alice, but more on that later.

On his next visit to Portland, Thomas meets the carpenter, Neil McLean. He asks McLean to measure him for a suit.

"I'm not a tailor; I'm a carpenter," McLean tells him.

"You'll do," Thomas replies, "it's a wooden suit I want."

In due course his coffin is made. It is plain, rough polished with a hinged lid and a lock and key. It arrives by bullock dray at Branxholme while Thomas

is away from the house. Confronted by the delivery, Alice is horrified to say the least. She goes to the backyard and grabs the axe to destroy the offending article. Before metal can strike casket though, Thomas rides up on his horse.

"Hey, let that alone," he tells her as he casts a satisfied eye over his purchase, "I paid five pounds for that coffin."

"Well, it's not coming into the house!"

But it did. It takes up residence in the bar, and, in a marketing triumph, Thomas stands it on end, puts some shelves in it and serves drink and cake from it. Visitors come from near and far to have a whisky and a piece of cake out of Tommy Best's coffin.

After a while the novelty wears off and the coffin is retired from the bar. Thomas has another idea for it. He hammers some nails into the adaptable casket and it becomes a wardrobe. It sits at the foot of his bed. By now Alice is more reconciled to her husband's coffin being in their home.

It is about now that William Robert Barlow aka Billy Barlow aka The Inimitable Barlow aka The Blue Tail'd Fly arrives in Portland. Barlow is a man born to perform. Since his teens he has been delighting audiences in England, Ireland, Scotland, America and now Australia with his talents. Barlow has been on the stage, both in theatres and under the big top, as a sole performer and in ensembles. His signature song is the 'Blue Tail'd Fly' and it is loved by so many that he is known by that name. He sings, dances, plays the piano, harmonium, violin, flute, rock harmonium, piccolo, concertina, castanets, organ mellophone, banjo, guitar, bones, gridiron and kitchen bellows. Barlow also develops his own comic characters to perform and is an expert at mimicry both vocal and with fiddle and banjo.

Hearing the story of Thomas Best's coffin on his first visit to Portland, Barlow knows he's on a winner. The comedic opportunity is too good to pass up. Furthermore, the extraordinary circumstance of a man getting his coffin made while in perfect health, and long before it is required, deserves a permanent record he believes. He writes the song in a day and night, and it is a true account, (apart, Barlow says, from the exaggeration that poetic licence allows).

Many strange things I've read in my time,
And many queer subjects I've put into rhyme;
But the one I'll now tell of, beats all ever I've read -
A man ordering his coffin before he is dead.
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

Tommy Best is his name; he's the picture of health;
Independent of this, he has plenty of wealth;
For Branhholme, near Portland, I've heard he is Mayor,
And for taking his nobbler you'll find him all there.
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

Now I'll tell you the way that it first came about;
For a joiner, one day, he was standing a shout;
The joiner not having much 'tin' in his fob,
Drank Tommy's good health and asked for a job.
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

"All right," said droll Best, with a smile on his face;
"I'll give you a job, which you'll own is a 'case'
You ne'er had the like of - I'm not chaffin';
I'll give you an order to make me a coffin."
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

The carpenter smiled, and thought him in jest,
"There's no gammon, I mean it," said the Mayor, Mr Best;
"And if for a moment you doubt what I say,
Take my measure, and down half the money I'll pay."
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

Then down on the nail a deposit was paid,
The measure he took, and the coffin was made,
From the choicest of wood, for this comical elf,
And the timber he actually cut out himself.
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

It was to be dove-tailed, well glued, and screwed,
For when in Branhholme, it would have to be viewed;
Now, by way of 'good health', when a nobbler he's quaffin',
Best says, "Boys, here goes another nail in my coffin!"
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

He'll run down like a watch, then with him 'tis a 'case',
And just like a watch, he has got a glass face,
To enable his friends to see the last of his beauty -
And Tommy can see that 'Big Mick' does his duty.
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

Inside, I believe there are many strange things;
Such as bell-ropes, electric wires and springs,

With pen, ink, and paper, and of wax a long stick,
To inform his friends what he thinks of Old Nick.
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

He's rigged out like a ship that's just put to sea,
Copper-bottomed, well-fastened - from leakage quite free;
He's a captain, no doubt, on his Branxholme estate,
But when he's in his coffin, he'll be the chief mate.
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

He intends, I believe, 'til he's stretched on the stocks,
This coffin to keep for a Sunday clothes box;
But when the time comes that he must be mute,
The 'clothes' box will 'close' him, and be his last suit.
Derry down, down, heigh derry down.

Barlow performs the song, 'Tommy Best's Coffin' for the remainder of his Portland 'Entertainments' at Mac's Hotel. Roars of applause follow the first stanza when the audience realise who and what the song will be about. When silence is restored, Barlow continues with his song, and Thomas Best and his coffin go down in history, (in the Western District at least).

Time passes. In 1856, Thomas sells The Traveller's Rest to Lang for £910. The following year he takes Lang to court: not for any repeat of a swindle like Kent's; Lang's pig destroyed goose eggs belonging to Thomas. Such are the highlights of living in Branxholme. The local correspondent for The Hamilton Spectator summed it up perfectly when he wrote in November 1860 - "It is not true that this place is so dull that the inhabitants forget the day of the week. Cobb's Coaches pass and re-pass on certain days, four times a week, and they prevent such a defect of memory".

On November 1st 1877, The Hamilton Spectator runs a story by its Sydney correspondent and Thomas Best's coffin is introduced to another generation. It begins; "The Inimitable Barlow, like an erratic comet, turned up here last week...we met that evening at the Occidental...he of the 'Blue-tail Fly' notoriety, cocking an eye, said, 'Let me see; it is now twenty years since I made your acquaintance, on my first visit to Portland. Tell me, do you remember Tom Collins, a sort of an undertaker that used to be there, who made the coffin for Tommy Best, of Branxholme?'"

The article goes on to explain how Tom Collins, a cockney, was the 'butt' of the funny men of Portland at that time. He had the habit of seizing on any squatters, or others with ready money, who came to Portland, until they placed an order for furniture and gave him a cheque for part payment. He also sat with any nearly dead, offering condolences and taking the opportunity to take their measure for a coffin. One local wag, Charley Pilven, spent a night at the Lamb Inn feigning illness. Tom Collins sat the whole night through with him,

taking his measure more than once. At dawn Pilven yawned and sent Collins away.

The story continues; "At this juncture Mr Thomas Best was at Portland, at the bar of Mac's Hotel, taking his 'morning' - a gin cocktail - when who should enter but the undertaker, Tom Collins, in hot haste.

'I'll take a mug of 'hale' and two cigars, I will,' said Collins.

'What! Ale at this hour!' said James Lowe, 'your coppers are hot this morning. How is Charley Pilven?'

'He aint no better nor he ought to be, he aint. Mocking is catching, it is. He will die some day, he will,' retorted Collins furiously...

Mr Lowe, winking at the Branxholme man, turned the current of the conversation by saying, 'There is Mr Best, he may want some furniture.' The eye of the country gentleman beamed with drollery, when Collins informed him that he made cabinet work for the Queen, 'he did'. The upshot of the affair was that Collins got an order to make a coffin for the 'Mayor of Branxholme', as Mr Best was then popularly called, who paid a cheque in advance. It was at this juncture that my friend Barlow entered Portland, and for several nights sang to crowded houses the subjoined verses..."

The article then finishes with the lyrics of 'Tommy Best's Coffin'.

Thomas reads the story of his coffin in the paper but can't agree with parts of it. To point out the errors in the account, on the same day as the newspaper was published, he writes to the Spectator.

"To the Editor of the Hamilton Spectator, Sir - I see in the Sydney news in your paper you have my coffin. It is all true, except about Tom Collins. It was Mr Neil McLean, the late Mayor of Portland, who had the order for the coffin and it was the late Mr Hutcheson, the miller, who picked the timber and cut it up for me. - I remain, yours truly, Thomas Best.
Branxholme, 1st November."

It is interesting to note that Thomas doesn't feel it necessary to correct the information about him taking a customary gin cocktail of a morning.

Five months later and Barlow, 'the erratic comet', arrives in Portland once more. In the intervening twenty years he has performed throughout the goldfields of Victoria, at the opening of George Coppin's Apollo Music Hall in Melbourne, and in China, New Zealand, England. He has travelled the world and then travelled it again with his 'Entertainments'. For a time he owned his own establishment in Gympie after following the gold rush there. After only seven months he sold out and went touring again. Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the world were covered once more. In the 1870s he landed back in Australia and made his way throughout it until April 1878, when he finds himself in Portland.

The district is delighted to have him back, but it is for one concert only. Thomas cannot attend the concert, much to his regret. He sends a telegraph though, and Barlow introduces 'Tommy Best's Coffin' by reading it out to the audience.

"Branxholme, 5th April, 1878. W. Barlow, Esq., Mac's or Club hotel. Please call at Branxholme to see my coffin. Signed Thomas Best, ex-Mayor."

Barlow sings his song and is answered by great applause from the audience. If only Thomas had been there to hear it.

More years pass. An accidental death occurs in Branxholme and the body needs to be transported to Hamilton for the inquest. There is no time to make a coffin so Thomas lends his. On its return Thomas concedes to Alice, and it no longer is used as a wardrobe. It takes up residence in the stable loft. Twice more over the years, the coffin is called to perform its intended duty, but never permanently. Each time it returns to the loft in the stable.

Thomas, who has been living on his farm, Richmond Hill, for many years now, is getting old. He leads a much quieter life than in those earlier times when coffins were bought for £5. He is, like the song prophesies, slowly winding down. The farm with its wonderful fruit garden becomes too much for him, and he and Alice sell up and move back into town.

They live in Lynch Street, in spitting distance of the old Traveller's Rest. Their weatherboard house has a stable out the back, with a loft, so Thomas's coffin has a home too. Cobb and Co. use the stables as a staging post and water the horses there, drawing water from the ninety-foot deep well in the yard. Other people have use of the stables too: travellers in need of shelter overnight. One such man is given a bed in the loft when night has already fallen. He wakes next morning and is startled to see he has slept beside a coffin.

For Thomas's grandson, the coffin in the stable loft holds no fear. Even the knowledge of its temporary occupants doesn't trouble him or his school mates. Rather, the coffin becomes a part of their games. They play 'funerals' and each boy takes a turn at being the 'corpse' and shut up in the coffin.

In 1886, Barlow returns. This time, and probably for the first time, Thomas Best gets to hear the song about his coffin performed by the Inimitable Barlow. It is at the Branxholme Mechanics Institute that Barlow gives his 'Entertainment'. Thomas attends with his family, his 10 year old grandson seated beside him. These two men, both in their sixties now, are at last introduced to each other. They have been in each other's orbit for the last thirty years now, Barlow's erratic comet blazing past Thomas' stationary planet, each affecting the other's life in some small way. It is a unique relationship.

Barlow, the comet blazes on. He is ever the performer, an entertainer with always another show to do in another place. Thomas keeps himself centered in Branxholme. He has the love of his wife Alice, and that of his two daughters and grandchildren. He has the respect of the Branxholme community.

The day comes when he begins to complain about a pain in his side. Days drift past like clouds in a blue sky until the night of the sixteenth of October.

The abscess that has been growing in Thomas' chest these past weeks ruptures and he collapses. The doctor comes, but it is too late now. In the early hours of the seventeenth of October 1888 he dies. Now is the time for the coffin made all those years ago. It has travelled with Thomas from pub to farm to town home. He has always, always, vowed he would be buried in it. Yet, now it is Alice who has the final say. She refuses to have Thomas buried in it, it is too worn, too crudely made for her husband. Mr Foster, the undertaker, is asked to supply a new one, a coffin more befitting of the 'ex-Mayor' of Branxholme.

And so the old coffin remains in the stable loft. It is no longer Thomas Best's coffin, yet it is still undeniably Tommy Best's, nothing can change that. It stays in the loft gathering dust until a new use is found for it. Thomas' nephew, not unlike his uncle, can see possibilities where others might not. He cuts the old coffin up and refashions it into a clothes box. The next phase of its life has started.