1. The Bush is actually a character in Australian literature. Do you agree? Discuss with suitable illustrations.

Ans: The ‘bush ballad’ is a style of poetry that attained great popularity in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, becoming an important emblem of Australian literary and popular culture. Generally narrating a story – often an exciting action or adventure – and frequently humorous in tone, the bush ballad almost invariably employs a straightforward rhyme structure and depicts the characters and scenery of rural Australia. Thought by many to convey an authentic expression of the national spirit, the bush ballad enjoyed particular popularity in the decade leading up to Federation in 1901. Though the vogue of the bush ballad subsided in the early twentieth century, the ballads of the 1890s have continued to exert an influence on conceptions of Australian identity and Australian poetry, and the bush ballads of writers such as A. B. ‘Banjo’ Paterson and Henry Lawson remain among the best-known works of Australian literature.

The development of the bush ballad was influenced by the large corpus of popular verse and song circulating in the Australian colonies throughout the nineteenth century. European migrants brought popular and traditional songs and ballads as part of their cultural baggage, and some of these works were adapted to suit Australian contexts. One of the most notable adapters of songs was the entertainer Charles Thatcher, who had a successful theatrical career in the goldrush era, performing parodies of popular English songs with new lyrics about life in the colonies. Songs and verse about life in Australia also appeared in nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals, and there is evidence to suggest that these works were regularly performed in areas where few other entertainments were available. Thematically, the songs dealt with aspects of life and work in the Australian bush, the nature of the land, the relations between white settlers and Aborigines, and celebrated outlaw figures such as bushrangers and convicts. In the 1880s and 1890s, requests for the lyrics of ‘bush’ songs began appearing in journals and newspapers, and the first dedicated collection, Old Bush Songs, an anthology edited by A. B. Paterson, was published in 1905.

The Australian bush ballad was also influenced by the popularity of the literary ballad, which was widespread in the English-speaking world in the late nineteenth century. The English poet Rudyard Kipling and the American writer Bret Harte were particularly well-known exponents of the literary ballad, and their poems of frontier and colonial life written in simple verse provided models for the Australian balladists. Perhaps the most significant pioneer of the Australian bush ballad, however, was Adam Lindsay Gordon, whose Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes was published just before his death in 1870. Although Gordon’s ballads more frequently centred on the action of the race track than the bush itself, his hugely popular poem ‘The Sick Stockrider’, and the anti-bushranger ballad ‘Wolf and Hound’, showed that the ballad form could provide an effective vehicle for the articulation of bush settings and characters. Gordon’s fame grew steadily through the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a

Another catalyst for the development of the bush ballad was the rise of periodical publications sympathetic to Australian nationalist sentiment. Foremost among these was The Bulletin, a weekly journal founded in 1880, which developed an avowedly nationalist and radical-democratic agenda and built up a large circulation, particularly in regional areas, over the following decades. Many of the leading exponents of the bush ballad – writers such as ‘Banjo’ Paterson, Henry Lawson, Barcroft Boake, Edward Dyson, E. J. Brady and Will Ogilvie – first established their literary reputations in the Bulletin’s pages. With its emphasis on the bush as a distinctively Australian setting, the bush ballad was perfectly suited to the Bulletin’s efforts to forge a national literature, and the journal’s views on what constituted ideal Australian qualities and values were important for the thematic range of the bush ballad form. The increasing popularity of the bush ballad led to other opportunities for these poets, sometimes referred to as ‘the Bulletin school’. In 1896, the emerging Sydney publishers Angus and Robertson published a number of works by the Bulletin’s balladists – including Paterson’s The Man from Snowy River and other poems and Lawson’s In the Days When the World was Wide – with great commercial and critical success. The Bulletin would continue to foster the emergence of writers working in the bush ballad or comic vernacular verse traditions into the twentieth century, with later popular writers including W. T. Goodge, Thomas E. Spencer and C. J. Dennis.

One of the chief characteristics of the bush ballad was its emphasis on rural Australian life – the society, characters and environment of ‘the bush’, ‘outback’, or ‘back-blocks’ – as the quintessential Australian experience. Yet there was considerable variation in the representation of bush life within the ballads, as different poets brought different perspectives and influences to their use of the form. Many of the best-known bush ballads – such as Paterson’s ‘The Man from Snowy River’ – narrated exciting adventures that celebrated the Australian bushman as a heroic figure; like Adam Lindsay Gordon, Paterson and many other balladists of the 1890s shared a love of horses and horsemanship that provided an important theme in their balladry. In other ballads, there was a more reflective and even elegiac tone, and the loneliness and hardships of bush life were emphasised – Lawson’s ‘Andy’s Gone With

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