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## The Women Walkers of Hahndorf *by Max Merckenschlager*

There's a tapping at my window as the midnight hours strike –  
it's the gentle form of Thekla in the frame.

We shall join a dozen neighbours on a routine mountain hike;  
cupping eyes and peering in, she mouths my name.

So I slide the wooden door-bolt back, admitting her with smiles  
and she turns me round to help me strap my load;  
near a hundredweight of produce I will carry twenty miles  
into Beaumont, on the rutted bullock road.

We are blessed this summer evening by a full moon in the sky,  
streams of light from Heaven's lantern flood the floor.  
For 'tis treacherous the narrow track our group shall travel by –  
pinch the candle-flame and softly close the door.

At the gathering the women wait, each laden with her wares  
and their thoughts are on the villains in The Tiers.  
We'll draw for straws to lead or trail and offer silent prayers;  
the bush is but a backdrop to our fears.

In single file and shoeless, soon we've left the valley floor;  
our leader has a strong and honest stride.  
We praise the Lord for bringing us to worship on this shore  
and we're coursing with our Prussian blood and pride.

Giant stringybarks engulf us, swords of Themeda grow rank,  
there are scurryings and rustles in the grass:  
the howling of a native dog, a zephyr foul and dank  
and we marshall our emotions as we pass.

The track winds down to Cox's Creek, we pause to drink and rest –  
its cooling waters salve our burning soles.  
Then roundelays and hymns are wrung from every pilgrim's breast,  
for witnessing is central of our roles.

They're stirring in the loggers' camp approaching Breakneck Hill;  
slipping naked from a cloud, the moon is blue.  
A wisp of camp-smoke teases in the early morning chill;  
she makes a dash and garbs herself anew!

The dawning is upon us; down below, the city plains  
run a patchwork to the oceans in the west.  
We marvel at the sweetness of the patchwork of refrains,  
as feathered creatures call our world from rest!

So on we'll walk and market, ever-lightening our loads  
then retrace our steps this evening to the hills.  
Within the week again we shall be conquering the roads,  
in providence, if God our Father wills.

Footnote: Hahndorf in the Adelaide Hills was first settled by practicing Lutherans from Prussia who were forced to flee religious oppression. They were led by their pastor and formed a close-knit, hard-working and successful farming community. Many of the young women carried produce for sale on their backs as they walked, often barefoot, through the night to Adelaide. They did this as a group for safety. The region of Mt Lofty Ranges between Bridgewater and Stirling, known then as 'The Tiers', was haunted by unsavoury characters making use of the many illicit grog shops and avoiding attention from the metropolitan police force.

**Max Merckenschlager** is a retired secondary school teacher of Agriculture and Science. He also taught English to Arab students in Yemen during 1989 and 1990. He and his wife Jacqui were native seed harvesters for 11 years in S.A. as 'Blackwood Seeds' principals, supplying seed for many direct seeding revegetation projects. The natural environment, social justice and Australian history dominate as themes in Max's poetry.