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## **“A Man Apart:” The Unwritten Tragedy of Henry Lawson**

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**Abstract:** When Henry Lawson died in 1922, he was publicly honoured as a “national writer,” but for the last twenty years of his life he had been a “derelict artist,” caught in a cycle of poverty, alcoholism and depression, humiliated, frustrated, often ashamed of the work that he was producing and haunted by the sense of the writer that he might have been. Almost a century later, there is no biography that adequately portrays the man and the circumstances that contributed to his collapse. Underlying this article, which considers aspects of his struggle to realize his literary ambitions, is the assumption that because Lawson’s work has such a strong autobiographical element, the way in which his life is read inevitably colours how his writing is read. Until there is a biography in which the tragic dimension of his life is fully recognized, our understanding of Lawson’s literary achievement remains incomplete.

**Keywords:** Henry Lawson, biography, mateship, nationalism, short stories

### **I**

“By some divine accident we have produced a national writer,” (79) wrote the aspiring young writer, Vance Palmer, on hearing of the death of Henry Lawson in 1922. He thought that Lawson’s work in prose had been transformative: “Australia was born in the spirit when Lawson began to write: when we look back on the days before his stories appeared, it almost seems as if we were looking at an alien landscape and unfamiliar people” (79). Palmer recognized, however, that “Lawson’s delicate genius was wasted, as most precious gifts are in this country” (79). As far as I know, he did not follow up the disturbing implications of this judgement, and remained essentially an apologist for the legendary nineties. No one who looks at Lawson’s career, not even those who enthuse over his weakest performances, can wholly avoid this sense of wasted talent. While still in his twenties he had received the sort of acclaim that most writers can only dream of, but by his mid-thirties, just when his writing seemed to be entering a new phase, he experienced a personal crisis that marked the end of his development as a writer. He continued to write for another twenty years, but he was humiliated, frustrated and often ashamed of the life he was living and the work he was publishing, a man haunted by the sense of the writer he might have been. Meeting Lawson just two months before he died, Palmer encountered “a derelict artist, whose faults and weaknesses were quite as obvious as his spark of divine fire” (80).

Almost a century after his death Lawson no longer has the sort of significance that he had for Palmer and his generation, but the waste of his talent is even more apparent. How could it have happened that Lawson ended up a “derelict artist?” The endless reminiscences and the several attempts at writing his biography offer little help in understanding what amounts to a tragedy. With the notable exception of Brian Matthews who in his study, *The Receding Wave*,

pointed to Lawson's "fragile artistic talent" (177), critics over the last half-century or so have generally located the cause of his failure in his personal weakness, most often pointing to his alcoholism. A. A. Phillips, while acknowledging that there were "varied and numerous" influences that contributed to Lawson's decline as a writer, put it bluntly that alcoholism had a "disintegrative effect on his powers of imaginative concentration" (487). Colin Roderick, who devoted so much of his life to collecting and editing Lawson's work, came to see him as a writer suffering from an "affliction," and in his biography, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, assumed a diagnosis of bipolar disorder as sufficient explanation for the decline of his creativity. The inadequacy of that explanation is suggested by an observation from Patrick White, who owed nothing to Lawson but felt that he understood him "instinctively—perhaps better than some of the authorities who have written about him" (55). "Lawson," he wrote, "strikes me as being an extremely complex character under his deceptively simple 'Australian' surface—a tortured manic depressive soul like so many other creative writers" (55). White may have been indulging in romantic overstatement, but his testimony is a useful caution against the usual over-simple interpretations of the connection between "the man who suffers" and "the mind that creates" (to borrow T. S. Eliot's famous formulation).

## II

Lawson's life was being read in public even as he lived it, as the frequent newspaper reports during his lifetime indicate. He was ready at times to tell the public about himself, sending letters for publication in *The Bulletin*, for instance, about his plans while in England ("I am sending Mrs Lawson and the children out with some friends...") (*Henry Lawson Letters* 132), his unacknowledged suicide attempt ("Had a fall a week or two back...") (*Henry Lawson Letters* 13), and his drinking ("I'm awfully surprised to find myself sober") (*Henry Lawson Letters* 144). Some aspects of his life—notably his drinking—were all too public; but others remain obscure, very obscure.

Published biographical accounts, drawing upon Lawson's unfinished autobiography, give some insight into the dysfunctional family in which he grew up; but important aspects of that family life—notably, the bitter sibling rivalry, and the mental illness suffered by his mother, Lawson himself, and his brothers—remain undocumented and unexamined, and the effect of his family circumstances on his performance as a writer has been only partially explored. Louisa Lawson's public role as a feminist and her early encouragement of her son have been recognized, but not the later difficult relationship between the talented son and the mother with literary ambitions. Lawson's nationalism is constantly emphasized, but apart from my own essay titled "Son of a Foreign Father: A View of Henry Lawson," there has been little consideration of his feelings about being "the son of a foreign father," and his fantasizing about his paternal inheritance: "I feel very Norse of late years" (qtd. in Barnes, "Son of a Foreign Father" 53).

Even more central to an understanding of Lawson's personal tragedy is his relationship with his wife and children: it is extraordinary that after so much has been written that it is so difficult to get a clear view of the woman whom he married, and towards whom he felt such bitterness after the breakdown of the marriage. Some periods of Lawson's life have been described in detail, but the crucial episodes of his trip to Bourke and his stay in England remain sketchy. That Lawson had a long association with *The Bulletin* and with the publishing firm of Angus & Robertson is well known, but discussion of his relations with editors and publishers in Australia seldom gets much beyond anecdotes of the feckless author; and the significance of his markedly different experience with editors and publishers in England is passed over.

Yet despite the serious lacunae, the public has long had the impression of knowing the man intimately, because his admirers—and, to some extent, Lawson himself—have, in effect, collaborated to produce a Lawson persona, which survives long after his death, and still influences the reading of his life and work today.

### III

The elements of the accepted public persona are clearly set forth in a book published in 1931 entitled *Henry Lawson By His Mates*, edited by his daughter, Bertha, and the then Professor of English Literature at Sydney University, John Le Gay Brereton. The title itself is indicative of the approach. Lawson's life is sentimentalized, the misery of his last twenty years when, estranged from his wife and restricted in his access to his children, he was caught in a deepening spiral of poverty, alcoholism and depression verging on insanity, is carefully avoided, almost as if it had never happened. In his essay, "Gusty Old Weather," in *Henry Lawson By His Mates* Brereton professed to think "that the truth should be told," (2) but in his role as "one of those who knew him best," (2) he created an ideal Lawson, "the poet of mateship" (3)—an image exactly matching that of Lambert's statue erected the same year, which was intended to show the writer as "a typical figure in the beginnings of Australian literature" (Lee 100).

Brereton had responded enthusiastically to the democratic sentiment of Lawson's early verse, and when the two men met late in 1894, there had been an instant rapport, despite the differences in their social and educational backgrounds. Remembering those "days of youth" ("Gusty Old Weather" 3), Brereton declared that it had been a privilege "to have roamed the streets with him, shared a common stock of freely expended cash, slept beside him under the same blanket, and listened sympathetically to his secrets" (3). This intimacy cannot have lasted more than about eighteen months, as by April 1896 Lawson was married, but the friendship endured. It was, however, a very unequal friendship, in which the "poet of mateship" was sometimes at odds with his academic friend. Angered by what he regarded as pedantic criticism, Lawson wrote "The Uncultured Rhymer to his Cultured Critics," expressing his resentment of "college coaching." The poem, which was directed at Brereton—although Lawson pretended otherwise—neatly defined their differing attitudes to the writing of verse: "You were quick to pick on a faulty line / That I strove to put my soul in" (*Henry Lawson: Collected Verse* 327). However much his friendship with "Jack Brereton B.A." may have meant to Lawson on a personal level, it did not help him to find his way as a writer, and to some extent increased his sense of insecurity.

As for Brereton, in a memoir entitled *Knocking Round*, he chose to remember Lawson as the mate with whom he "knocked around," and wrote of "enjoying our Bohemian adventures cheerfully and irresponsibly" (34). Clearly, the short period when Brereton shared "Bohemian adventures" with the impecunious writer mattered greatly to the prize-winning young graduate in English Literature from a middle-class background, who had never known the poverty and loneliness experienced by his companion. In 1894 Brereton, then a socialist whose theme was "the brotherhood of man," had praised Lawson as a poet, saying that "[t]he workers should hail him as their God-sent prophet" (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 1). Nearly forty years later in *Henry Lawson By His Mates*, he almost totally ignored Lawson's prose, and recycled that early response to the verse. The Lawson that Brereton constructed was the embodiment of the national ideal that Brereton himself proclaimed: "The spirit of Australian mateship speaks to us, and through us in the voice of Henry Lawson" ("Gusty Old Weather" 14).

#### IV

The characterization of Lawson as “mateship’s leading apostle” (Dyrenfurth 61) in a recent book *Mateship: A Very Australian History* is striking testimony to the continuing potency of the popular view so persuasively presented by Brereton. Despite the profound changes in Australian society since the Second World War, the notion that Australian identity is defined by mateship has proved to be remarkably durable, and has appealed to political progressives and conservatives alike, especially since it has become entwined with the Anzac legend in which the age-old concept of sacrifice for one’s country is reworked as a myth of the birth of nationhood. By ignoring the contradictions and discrepancies, it isn’t difficult to make a selection of Lawson’s work that places him as an exemplar of what Russel Ward in an influential book called the “Australian legend,” in which the “Bush” is the source of the distinctive national value of “mateship.” But reading Lawson in this way, which threatens to distort his real achievement by identifying him with the narrowly nationalistic, racially oriented, and masculinist values of his period, blocks an understanding of what sort of writer he was and what went wrong.

Lawson’s verse was always popular, but his reputation as a serious writer was based on what was taken to be the realism of his portrayal of Australian life—and specifically life beyond the city—in his prose. When *While the Billy Boils* was published in 1896, reviewers praised his truthfulness and genuineness. A typical judgment was that of John Farrell in the *Daily Telegraph* on 29 August 1896: “No book could be more unmistakably the product of experience and observation” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 56). There was general agreement that, whatever their limitations, the stories and sketches were valuable because of their subject matter. The unidentified reviewer in *Freeman’s Journal*, for instance, recognized that the stories and sketches would not only “show the townsfolk what life in the interior is like,” but “outside Australia they will open up to readers a new country as interesting and unknown as any place discovered by Eastern or African travellers” (19). That claim was borne out by E. V. Lucas’s review, “An Australian Humorist,” in the *London Academy* on 17 July 1897: “He shows us what living in the Bush really means” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 65). “Whatever else may be said of it,” wrote Price Warung in the *Bathurst Free Press* on 29 August 1896, “certain it is that this book must make Australians know their Australia better” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 49).

However, while acknowledging Lawson’s realism, reviewers often expressed reservations about the scope of his subject matter, and way in which he viewed it. “This ‘out back’ is a fine field for the pessimist, and Mr Lawson is a pronounced pessimist,” (10) was the opinion of the *Australian Town and Country Journal*. A brief notice in *The Worker* offered the opinion that an “undercurrent of hopelessness, not to say despair, which is so marked a characteristic of his verse, is not so strong in his prose sketches” (3). In *The Champion*, “P. M.” (John B. Castieau) thought that city readers would find the insights into the life of the bush “impressive,” but sounded a warning: “The danger is that Lawson possibly has, by the very necessities of his circumstances, viewed things with a circumscribed vision, and with the restrictions of a pessimistic temperament” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 61).<sup>1</sup>

Lawson’s response to such criticism of his work was to appeal to the authority of personal experience. “No one who has not been there can realise the awful desolation of Out Back in ordinary seasons,” he wrote in “The Bush and the Ideal” a year after *While the Billy Boils*

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<sup>1</sup> Orig. as “Lawson’s Prose” in *The Champion*, 5 September 1896.

appeared, in which he attacked “the coastal Australian’s ignorance of the Australian back country”:

I have been accused of painting the bush in the darkest colours from some equally dark personal motives. I might be biased—having been there; but it is time the general public knew the back country as it is, if only for the sake of the bush outcasts who have to tramp for ever through broiling mulga scrub and baking lignum, or across blazing plains by endless tracks of red dust and grey, through a land of living death. (*Autobiographical and Other Writings* 31)

As this comment reveals, Lawson could not explain himself beyond re-affirming his deeply felt memory of what he had experienced in a brief stay in the “Out Back”.

Lawson’s trip to Bourke in north-western New South Wales (the “Out Back”) in 1892 was to prove to be a watershed in his literary career; but as I have discussed in a forthcoming article, “The Making of a Legend: Henry Lawson at Bourke,” there is no record of why he went and what he hoped to do there. On the strength of E. J. Brady’s reminiscence, it is generally accepted that J. F. Archibald, editor of *The Bulletin*, prompted by Brady, gave Lawson a one-way railway ticket and £5 to get him away from Sydney. Archibald, who displayed a paternal interest in him, feared that his promising young contributor was drinking too much and was not developing his talent. Lawson had large literary ambitions and wanted to concentrate on creative writing for the *Bulletin* and similar journals; but first he had to find a regular income, and journalism had seemed to be the answer. The previous year he had been invited on to the staff of a *Labor* newspaper in Brisbane, but that enterprise collapsed and he had known “the shame of going back” to Sydney, where he tried to make a living by doing hack work for a newspaper called *Truth*, supplemented by contributions to *The Bulletin*, and house-painting whenever he could get it. With no prospects of anything better than the hand-to-mouth existence he was leading in Sydney, he may well have thought that Bourke would give him a new start.

For a couple of months Lawson made no attempt to go beyond in the township of Bourke, a thriving inland port on the Darling river about 500 miles from Sydney. He had contacted a local newspaper in advance, and for the first month was employed writing political verses—the sort of hack work that he had been doing in Sydney. Then he worked as a painter, a trade to which he had been apprenticed. It is possible that Lawson might never have gone beyond the confines of the township if he had not met Jim Grahame,<sup>2</sup> a younger man who was “knocking around” in the “Out Back.” When Grahame decided to look for work on a sheep station, Lawson chose to go with him rather than to continue painting houses. Theirs was a casual association such as was common among itinerant bush workers: a man on his own was more vulnerable to the physical and psychological threats that the bush posed than a man with a work mate. With Grahame as his mate, Lawson learnt what it was like to be a landless worker in the bush—a “bush outcast.” They worked as rouseabouts in a shearing shed, and when the shearing cut out walked hundreds of kilometres to Hungerford on the Queensland border and back, looking for work. In an unpublished reminiscence written just after Lawson’s death, Grahame is circumspect about what happened between them, but he clearly found it difficult to deal with Lawson’s moodiness—“a discontented Lawson was a problem,” he remarks laconically (qtd. in Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life* 92). Of the three

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<sup>2</sup> James W. Gordon (1874-1949) wrote as “Jim Grahame,” the name by which Lawson knew him. He wrote three reminiscences of Lawson: the first, which remains in manuscript in the State Library of Victoria, is quoted in part in Colin Roderick’s *Henry Lawson: A Life*; the second, “Henry Lawson on the Track,” was published in *The Bulletin*, 19 February 1925; the third, “Amongst My Own People,” is in *Henry Lawson By His Mates*.

weeks or so that they worked as rouseabouts he writes that it was “a dreary time,” (qtd. in Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life* 93) and that Lawson “was a man apart, having little in common with those whom he worked with” (93). This tallies with the impression formed by A. G. Stephens, literary editor of *The Bulletin*, that Lawson in the “Out Back” was an “unfortunate towney, deaf and shy and brooding” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 217).

In a much-quoted verse exchange with Paterson in *The Bulletin* before going to Bourke, Lawson, posing as one who had been “up the country,” insisted upon the harshness of the environment and the suffering of the people who lived there. Rejecting the “vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended,” of “Banjo” Paterson’s well-known “Clancy of the Overflow,” (Paterson 10) first published in *The Bulletin* in 1889, Lawson mocked the images with which bush bards were wont to celebrate the inland—“sunny plains,” “shining rivers,” and the like. When he did literally go “up the country” the reality seemed to him to be worse than he had imagined. “I was right and Banjo was wrong,” (*Henry Lawson Letters* 49) he wrote in a letter at the end of the train trip from Sydney. On reaching Hungerford after walking for over a fortnight, he wrote in another letter of “the horrors of the country out here,” not merely the physical hardship but the degradation: “Men tramp and beg and live like dogs” (*Henry Lawson Letters* 53). He was so shaken by the experience that he was determined to get back to Sydney, “never to face the bush again” (*Henry Lawson Letters* 53).

Lawson never again faced the bush in person, but he did work over his experience again and again for the rest of his life. In the years immediately after the Bourke trip he vigorously, even stridently, proclaimed his resistance to the mythology of the bush that was taking shape. “We wish to Heaven that Australian writers would leave off trying to make a paradise out of the Out Back Hell,” (*Autobiographical and Other Writings* 25) he wrote in his article “Some Popular Australian Mistakes,” in which he referred to a shearing shed as “the most degrading hell on the face of the earth,” (24) and declared that the “poetical bushman does not exist” (25). In another, entitled “The Cant and Dirt of Labor Literature,” he wrote: “That egotistic word ‘mateship’—which was born of New Australian imagination, and gushed about to a sickening extent—implied a state of things which never existed any more than the glorious old unionism which was going to bear us on to freedom on one wave” (*Autobiographical and Other Writings* 27). That article appeared in *The Worker*, the union newspaper on the staff of which Lawson was for a time employed. At their first meeting Brereton, a true believer in “the glorious old unionism,” was disconcerted by Lawson’s reaction to his views:

‘Now listen,’ he said. ‘I know what I’m talking about. I couldn’t say it in public because my living depends partly on what I’m writing for the *Worker*; but you can take it from me, Jack, the Australian worker is a brute and nothing else.’ (*Knocking Round* 33).

To Brereton it seemed that this remark came from “the bitterness in his heart” after his encounter with “the careless, rough company of the shearing sheds” (33) and his impression of Lawson at this time tallies with that one taken away from Grahame’s unpublished memoir: “It was a mood, but one that was characteristic of his shrinking self-consciousness” (Brereton, *Knocking Round* 33). The unsettled and insecure young man from Sydney did not find in the “Out Back” the sort of working-class mateship that Brereton idealized; but he did find images in which he could express his own feelings of loneliness and isolation. As Frank Sargeson has written: “He looked at the desolation of the Australian inland, and he saw his own interior desolation” (422).

## V

Before Lawson went to Bourke in September 1892, he had written little fiction; but two of his earliest attempts—"The Drover's Wife," published in *The Bulletin* on 23 July that year and "The Bush Undertaker," which appeared in *The Antipodean* while he was in Bourke—are among his more memorable stories. These sketch-stories are studies of individuals whose humanity is threatened in "the bush." The drover's wife, in an isolated hut with her children, has learnt how to survive; but the old shepherd has become a "hatter," in whom the dehumanising effect of the loneliness of his life is apparent. What distinguishes these two stories is Lawson's success in handling the theme of existential threat. That theme, which runs through so much of his fiction, was to find more immediate and more personal expression after he experienced, albeit so briefly, the "Out Back," which he discovered was more threatening than the settled countryside in which he had grown up.

The first fruit of the trip was "In a Dry Season," a laconic account of the train journey from Sydney to Bourke. Although it has the appearance of being descriptive journalism, this is a personal impression in which the carefully selected detail evokes the traveller's state of mind. It marks the beginning of a new phase in his writing. Another early piece was based upon the funeral of a man accidentally drowned at Bourke. Whether or not "The Union Buries Its Dead" was "true in every detail," as Lawson afterwards claimed, it was true to his feeling about the occasion. He had become friendly with several of the union leaders, and was about to join—or had just joined—the General Labourers Union; but his distress at the drunken behaviour of unionists at the funeral of the drover, who was "almost a stranger in town," provoked him to savage irony: "unionism is stronger than creed. Drink, however, is stronger than unionism" (*While the Billy Boils* 92). The unnamed narrator, himself one of the "fourteen souls following the broken shell of a soul," reflects: "Perhaps not one of the fourteen possessed a soul any more than the corpse did—but that doesn't matter" (92). The emotional bleakness of the actual burial is emphasized by the narrator's drawing attention to the absence of the sort of emotive props—the wattle, the heart-broken old mate and the "sad Australian sunset"—found in conventional stories of bush life. This insistence that the "truth" of the sketch is unembellished is all the more notable because Lawson so often found it hard to resist the temptation to use such props.

Another memorable first-person narrative is the sketch entitled "Hungerford," which reads like a personal reminiscence of what he and Grahame found when they reached the town on the Queensland border. However, this sardonic report is far from being any sort of "balanced" journalistic description of the town divided by a rabbit-proof fence, with rabbits on both sides of it. The grim humour with which the narrator regards the town and the landscape in which it is located—"a blasted, barren wilderness, which doesn't even howl" (*While the Billy Boils* 42)—intensifies his feeling of alienation. Lawson takes another shot at Paterson with an allusion to his famous character, Clancy of the Overflow: "an old man who was minding a mixed flock of goats and sheep" turns out to be a drover called Clancy, who expresses his feeling about the "blanky colonies" (43) by spitting on either side of the colonial boundary fence.

Although Lawson never attempted any consecutive narrative of his time "on the track" with Grahame, that experience of being with a "mate" was of central importance in his creative life and led to some of his most impressive writing. Within a very short time—a month or so—of their return to Bourke from Hungerford Lawson had started writing sketches that feature the swagman, Mitchell, and his mate. "Mitchell: A Character Sketch," the first to appear, celebrates the ability of the nimble-witted Mitchell to get "tucker" for himself and his

mate at a “mean” station. The inspiration for that initial sketch had been Lawson’s observation of Jim Grahame’s ability to handle people, but most often in later sketches Mitchell talks and the narrator, his mate, listens. Partly a self-portrait of Lawson and partly a version of Grahame, Mitchell is presented as a sort of bush philosopher, who accepts the loneliness, drabness and monotony of his life and can even view it with a sense of humour. In giving a voice to the swagman and identifying with his perspective Lawson was doing something quite new. “Mr Lawson,” said the anonymous reviewer of *While the Billy Boils* in the *Freeman’s Journal*, “has taken the ‘swagman’ by the hand, and has introduced him to the English-speaking public” (19).

Lawson’s democratic outlook was readily acknowledged, but even among those who admired his prose writing there was little recognition of the originality displayed in such sketches as “The Union Buries Its Dead” and “Hungerford.” Appreciation of his approach to narrative usually took the form of praise for his “literary photographs:” the Kodak camera was still a novelty, and one reviewer actually called Lawson “a kodaker,” (*Morning Bulletin* 6) while another remarked on his “capacity to seize upon the essential features of a scene so as to give in a few lines a sharp-cut, Kodak-like presentation” (*Goulburn Evening Penny Post* 2). This was accurate enough, but didn’t recognize how much more than surface realism there was in Lawson’s slight, extremely economical sketches. Years after Lawson’s death, Edward Garnett was to remark that “Lawson gets more feeling observation and atmosphere into a page than does Hemingway” (17).<sup>3</sup> Lawson had discovered for himself the form of fiction in which he could best express what he felt. In his handling of the sketch (or sketch-story) he was following no literary models. It is possible to see now that Lawson was heading in a direction taken by twentieth-century modernists, but his contemporaries saw the absence of plotted narrative as a limitation that he needed to overcome.

“His Father’s Mate,” Lawson’s first published story, had followed the model of a Bret Harte story; it was a sort of condensed novel, divided into chapters, and is not unfairly described as conventional in form and substance. Four years later Lawson was writing remarkably economical sketches such as “On the Edge of a Plain,” in which there is no “story” in the conventional sense, and the whole effect depends upon delicate handling of detail. Like so many artists Lawson had little to say about the rationale of his work: the closest he ever came to explaining what he was doing was to say: “The sketch to be good must be good in every line” (*Autobiographical and Other Writings* 250). The editorial advice to *Bulletin* contributors was not to waste words, to “boil it down.” Lawson was recognizably a *Bulletin* writer, but the literary editor of that newspaper, A. G. Stephens, criticized *While the Billy Boils* as “scrappy and disconnected” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 51). Stephens’s surprising attack led another reviewer of the book, who thought of *The Bulletin* as “the arch encourager of the scrappy (but artistically scrappy withal),” to say that “Satan was rebuking sin the other day” (*Barrier Miner* 2). Criticising Lawson’s “detached sketches,” Stephens suggested that “many of his fragmentary impressions” could have been written as “a single plotted story, climaxed story” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 51). He was prepared to allow Lawson “a touch of genius,” but he pontificated: “Art he has none” (52). Stephens was the only critical authority at hand, and Lawson could not help but feel the pressure of the prevailing critical orthodoxy that he expounded. Lawson had been tempted by the notion that he could write a novel, and never wholly gave up the idea, but by the time of Stephens’s review he had come to realize, as he told George Robertson, his publisher: “I’m not a

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<sup>3</sup> In his *Islands in the Stream*, Hemingway, in effect, pays a tribute to Lawson by having a character sit late into the night reading his stories.

novelist” (*Henry Lawson Letters* 67). However, critical opinion and the economics of the marketplace discouraged any further experimentation with sketches, and encouraged Lawson to become a more conventional story-teller. Looking back over Lawson’s career, Stephens was dismissive of this early work as “naïve and artless” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 126).

## VI

This notion of Lawson as “artless” was to become an important element in the construction of him as a National Writer, an untaught genius who had captured the essential spirit of the new society that Europeans were building in Australia. “Poor Lawson,” wrote John Tighe Ryan, “is a true son of the Australian bush, a genius to the fingertips:” this “awkward youth of twenty seven, who never entered a college, or got within speaking distance of a University professor,” and who was “ignorant of the manners of good society,” was “the greatest gift the gods have so far given to Australia” (qtd. in Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life* 162). This emphasis upon his lack of education and literary culture, even when it was well meant, left Lawson feeling patronised and resentful, and less sure of his direction as a writer.

Stephens, whose personal relationship with Lawson was very up and down, said no more than the truth when he wrote on the Red Page of *The Bulletin* in 1898: “The much-advised and patronised Lawson ... is thin-skinned [enough] for two.”<sup>4</sup> From early youth Lawson had felt vulnerable: “I was painfully shy and extremely sensitive, sensitive about my deafness, my lack of education, my surroundings, my clothes, slimness and paleness, my ‘hs,’ handwriting, grammar, punctuation (made worse by deafness)—everything almost” (*Autobiographical and Other Writings* 206). Seeking self-improvement, as an apprentice in Sydney he had gone to night school, but had twice failed to pass the matriculation examination to Sydney University. A sense of inadequacy made him defensive in the face of criticism that implied the need of formal education: “‘I was taught too little?’ I learnt too much / To care for a pedant’s diction,” he wrote in “The Uncultured Rhymer to his Cultured Critics” (*Henry Lawson: Collected Verse* 327) But, whatever critics said, he knew that his writing, especially his verse, was popular. In reply to the criticism of “cultured friends,” Lawson could vaunt: “I come with the strength of the living day, / And half the world behind me” (*Henry Lawson Collected Verse* 327). And yet, in the years following the success of *While the Billy Boils* Lawson became convinced that he could not survive as a serious writer in Australia. In his article “‘Pursuing Literature’ in Australia,” which the *Bulletin* published in January 1899, he gave an account of his writing career, and concluded by advising “any young Australian writer whose talents have been recognized” to leave Australia rather than stay “till his genius turned to gall, or beer” (*Autobiographical and Other Writings* 115)—or, failing that, to commit suicide. This very public revelation of his feeling of desperation came at a time when his reputation had never been higher.

It is one thing to see Lawson as an uncultured genius, a local phenomenon, but quite another to see him as a struggling writer with large but undefined ambitions, dependent upon what he could earn as a freelance writer, mostly by hack-work for Sydney papers. His hopes of gaining some degree of economic security through an editorial appointment were never realized. Nor were his hopes of improving his lot by going away from Sydney—to New Zealand twice, and to Western Australia. He was constantly short of ready money—he had to

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<sup>4</sup> As literary editor of *The Bulletin* Stephens included personal comment along with literary critical material on the inside front cover, which was headed “The Red Page,” because the weekly was printed with red covers.

borrow money to get married—and like so many writers he had no head for business, the most striking evidence of which was his selling outright the copyright of *In the Days When the World was Wide* and *While the Billy Boils*. There was no Society of Authors to advise him, and he had no literary agent to protect his interests. Nor were there prizes or government grants to give the promising young writer a breathing space.

From the time of his return in 1893 to Sydney from Bourke until his departure in 1900 from Sydney to London, Lawson lived a disordered, makeshift life, which is encapsulated in Brereton's memory of helping him to shift from a cheap lodging house to a hotel, with all his "worldly goods" in a large sack. "Bohemian adventures" that Brereton recalled included memories of times when he and Lawson were "surprised by the assaults of penury and hunger" (*Knocking Round* 35). In late nineteenth-century English society the word "Bohemian" is code for behaviour by artists that would not be acceptable in "respectable" society, specifically unrestrained drinking of alcohol—Lawson is credited with having coined "Beerhemia" (Kirkpatrick 52). As one commentator has put it, "Bohemianism allowed delinquent Victorian writers to crave society's indulgence" (Cross 93). George Taylor's *Those Were the Days* has probably done more than any other piece of writing to fix an image of Sydney artists in the 1890s as amusing Bohemians. It has to be treated with caution as an historical source—indeed, any book with that title should be treated with caution as an historical source—but in one chapter it unintentionally displays how little his self-proclaimed Bohemian friends understood Lawson. Taylor records how a group, including Frank Mahony whose sketch of Lawson as a swagman appeared on the title page of *In The Days When the World Was Wide*, talked about going to the back-country for a short vacation, citing the example of "Harry Lawson" who "got his 'local color' through personal experience, so it was up to the other Bohemian boys to do something in that line" (qtd. in Taylor 54).

Although in his last years Lawson wrote nostalgically about "the old Bohemian days," Arthur W. Jose—who worked with him in editing his first two books published by Angus & Robertson—was probably right in thinking that Lawson was a victim of "pseudo-Bohemianism" (Jose 17). Beer released his inhibitions and lessened his sense of isolation, but the heavy drinking encouraged by his associates in Sydney threatened both his marriage and his literary career; and by late 1898 he accepted the necessity of treatment for alcoholism. Bert Stevens, one of his drinking companions, noted that during his brief membership of the Dawn and Dusk Club—in which the moving spirit was Victor Daley, who tried to create the atmosphere of a salon—he "took no interest in the talk" (Stevens 484). In London he enjoyed the company of literary men like Edward Garnett and E. V. Lucas, but in Sydney there was no literary company in which he found stimulus. It is not surprising that he told the young Miles Franklin to keep away from other writers, "they can do you no good" (*Henry Lawson Letters* 135). In a Sydney pub as in a Bourke shearers' hut, he was "a man apart."

After the critical and popular success of *While the Billy Boils*—and especially after overseas publishers showed an interest in his work—Lawson came to believe that his future as a writer depended upon his getting to London, where he could hope for better payment for his writing. "England is my only chance. If I stayed here another six months I'd go mad" (*Henry Lawson Letters* 115), he told a friend early in 1900. By then he had been teetotal for over a year and he had a second volume of stories soon to be published, but he saw no hope of earning enough money to take his family to England. He solved the problem in an extraordinary way: having heard that the new Governor of New South Wales, Lord Beauchamp, had spoken approvingly of his work, he wrote to him: "Will you help me to get out of the miserable hole I am in?" (*Henry Lawson Letters* 114). With the letter he sent a scrapbook of reviews and

correspondence about his work, and a copy of Barcroft Boake's poems, explaining that the poet had hanged himself "for the same reasons that I want to raise myself out of this hole of a place" (*Henry Lawson Letters* 113). In the English aristocrat the Australian democrat and sometime republican found a benefactor, who came to his aid with a "loan," which enabled him to travel to England with his wife and two small children. He could afford only steerage, but shortly before the ship sailed first-class passengers were surprised to see an orderly from Government House present him with a letter! He now had the opportunity that he had sought: "I was free at last, to fight my battle," was how he put it afterwards ("Succeeding": A Sequel to 'Pursuing Literature'" 364).

## VII

"First of all, get a good agent—and trust him with your soul, and let him alone" ("Succeeding": A Sequel to 'Pursuing Literature'" 369) was advice that Lawson gave years later to any Australian wanting to pursue a literary career in London. He had intended to handle the marketing of his work himself, as he had done in Sydney, but within three months of his arrival in April 1900 he had taken the advice of the editor of a London periodical to get an agent. Lawson had come to London with the advantages of having already made a reputation as a colonial writer and having attracted the attention of several English publishers, but he was so unbusinesslike that without an agent he would probably have quickly found himself back in the same "miserable hole" from which he had just escaped. James B. Pinker, the agent with whom he signed up, was prepared to support his writers financially, paying them a regular amount even when nothing was coming in, an arrangement which gave Lawson a degree of security such as he had never known before. (Barnes, "Henry Lawson and the 'Pinker of Literary Agents'" 89-105)

Pinker was very effective in representing the interests of his authors. Joseph Conrad (who became one of Pinker's clients the month after Lawson did) once said that his books owed their existence "to Mr Pinker as much as to me" (qtd. in Barnes, "Henry Lawson and the 'Pinker of Literary Agents'" 91). Lawson might well have said the same of his two new short-story collections published in England, *Joe Wilson and His Mates* in 1901 and *The Children of the Bush* in 1902. Settled in a village within easy reach of the metropolis and without the familiar worry about ready money, Lawson at last had the chance he had long desired to "pursue literature." At first, all went well, and with "Brighten's Sister-in-law," the first of the Joe Wilson series that he planned and the longest story that he had written, Lawson appeared to be moving towards fiction richer in psychological interest than his earlier work. The Joe Wilson stories are strong evidence in support of the argument of Freudian critic, Xavier Pons, that Lawson's inspiration largely came from "his own person, and the various problems associated with it" (Pons 22). Joe Wilson, the narrator of the four stories collected in the volume, is unmistakably a critical self-portrait by Lawson. Anyone familiar with Lawson's biography has no trouble in identifying stories that bear a direct reference to his personal experience; but it is disconcerting to discover just how directly he drew upon his own marriage situation in portraying that of the fictional Joe and his wife Mary. In mid-October, when Lawson told William Blackwood of his planned Joe Wilson series, Bertha Lawson was in an asylum, having suffered a mental breakdown a few weeks earlier. The last story in the proposed series was: "7—The Luck That Came Too Late" (Joe Wilson gets money and his wife goes insane—but whether she recovers or dies I have not decided)" (qtd. in Barnes, "Henry Lawson in London" 29).

It was to be ten months before Bertha Lawson had fully recovered, during which time Lawson, "ill and nearly mad with worry" struggled on, with the support of Pinker who "stuck

to me all through my trouble like a brick,” as he told D. S. Mitchell in 1902 (*Henry Lawson Letters* 131). To add to the distress, the relationship between husband and wife was deteriorating: not only did Bertha want desperately to return to Australia, but she also wanted to separate from him. Such unhappy circumstances could be expected to affect the work of a writer; and given the nature of Lawson’s inspiration the impact was great. The Joe Wilson series petered out, and Lawson’s stories became increasingly sentimental. Reviewing the second collection, *Children of the Bush*, in *The Bulletin* Stephens took the view that Lawson “has more of the art of the story-teller now than he had before,” but noted “a great deal of the padding of the common or magazine order of story-teller” (Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism* 126).

Lawson’s decline is evident also in that collection when he takes on the role of the interpreter of Australia for English readers. In “The Romance of the Swag,” for instance, one finds such emptily rhetorical passages as this: “The Australian swag was born of Australia and no other land—of the Great Lone Land of magnificent distances and bright heat; the land of Self-reliance, and Never-give-in, and Help-your-mate” (*Children of the Bush* 136). At the end of “Send Round the Hat,” a story idealizing the kindness of the bushmen, the bushman-author in London reflects on the contrast between the present and his past in the bush:

And as I sit here writing by lamplight at mid-day, in the midst of a great city of shallow social sham, of hopeless, squalid poverty, of ignorant selfishness, cultured or brutish, and of noble and heroic endeavour frowned down or callously neglected, I am almost aware of a burst of sunlight in the room, and a long form leaning over my chair, and,—

‘Excuse me for troublin’ yer; I’m always troublin’ yer; but there’s that there poor woman....’

And I wish I could immortalise him! (*Children of the Bush* 21)

The Australian sunlight is given a moral dimension, signifying as it does the “kindness” that is absent from London but is to be found in the land of “Help-your-mate.” Praising Lawson for portraying life “characteristic of Australia” in *While the Billy Boils*, one reviewer—in *Freeman’s Journal*, 5 September 1896—had remarked that “its crudeness and harshness and utter hopelessness must destroy any idea of romance that the reader may have associated with the Australian bush” (19). In *The Children of the Bush*, for all the surface realism, romance returns—not the romance of colonial fiction but the romance of manual workers in the bush.

At the front of the volume Lawson placed a poem, “The Shearers,” idealizing the very workers from whom he had recoiled ten years earlier at Bourke. The following lines have often been quoted for their definition of “Australian mateship”:

‘Tis hardship, drought and homelessness

That teach those Bushmen kindness:

The mateship born of barren lands,

Of toil and thirst and danger—

The camp-fare for the stranger set,

The first place to the stranger. (*Children of the Bush* ix)

Writing to Edward Garnett in 1902, Lawson explained that the book, which he originally planned to call “The Heart of Australia,” “is centred at Bourke and all the Union leaders are in it. If you know Bourke, you know Australia.” (“Letter to Edward Garnett” n. pag.) The stories like “Send Round the Hat,” in which he reworked his Bourke experience, are very different in attitude and technique from the sharply focused impressionistic sketches of *While the Billy Boils*. At times the line between autobiography and fiction is completely blurred, as characters bear the names of real-life people, and “Harry”—the author, who has an easy and

close relationship with the shearers—reminisces about being at Bourke in 1892. There is “background,” descriptive detail of the kind that finds no place in the early sketches, and generally what the stories offer is less a realistic account of bush life than a heart-warming exposition of an imagined “Bush religion.”

In reworking his Bourke experience, Lawson—a lonely man near breaking point—replaced painful memory with consoling images of what Brereton called “the brotherhood of man.” “Send Round the Hat” tells of “the Giraffe”—a real-life shearer, Bob Brothers, whose name is given in the story—who practices Christian charity so thoroughly that one of his other nicknames is “Send-round-the-hat.” To make sure that readers get the point, Lawson places at the head of the story a quatrain explaining “the creed from the Book of the Bush.”

Such stories of the bushmen displaying kindness of heart and practicing mateship have been readily accepted by later generations as expressive of the “real” Australia, and as representative of Lawson. *Children of the Bush* was published in London as Lawson returned to Australia. When his Australian publisher reprinted the collection five years later, it was issued in two parts, *Send Round the Hat* and *The Romance of the Swag*. In both the World’s Classics *Australian Short Stories*, edited by Walter Murdoch and Henrietta Drake-Brockman in 1950, and *The Penguin Book of Australian Short Stories*, edited by Harry Heseltine in 1978, “Send Round the Hat” is the story chosen to represent Lawson.

With the publication of *Children of the Bush* Lawson’s creative life was virtually at an end. The attempt to escape from Sydney and to establish himself as a professional writer outside Australia ended with his return in 1902, distressed at the failure of his marriage and resentful of what he regarded as “lies” that were being told about his behaviour, less able than before to cope with his own manic-depressive moods and less confident of his future as a writer. Within a few months he had attempted suicide.

## VIII

“Ghost-hunted through the streets he goes”—a line from a Mary Gilmore poem written in 1911 is evocative of the “derelict artist” for whom the young Vance Palmer felt a degree of reverence. There were occasions when he recovered some of his former creative strength, but mostly this later writing is interesting only as a form of documentation of his psychological state. The keen feeling out of which his finest work had come intensified his suffering; but, despite all, he continued to write, trying in various ways to confront creatively the wreck of his life. Three days before he died he delivered to *The Bulletin* office the manuscript of the last of a series of city sketches, and he was actually working on a sketch—about an incident that had occurred in London—the morning of his death.

“They buried Henry like a lord,” (Lang 192) wrote his politician brother-in-law, J. T. Lang, who saw the irony of a state funeral, attended by leading citizens who, only a week before, on seeing Lawson in the street “would have dodged by on the other side to avoid him” (192). (Perhaps the greatest irony was that at the funeral of a man who had been imprisoned for being drunk and disorderly and for failure to pay family maintenance, the official mourners included the Inspector-General of Prisons, while the Police Band led the funeral procession.) Lawson’s reputation as Australia’s National Writer was acknowledged by the state funeral, and the process of memorialization began almost immediately.

Through all his years of misery and degradation Lawson had maintained a hold on the public as no other writer had done, because of what he had written about the bush. The assumption

behind the elevation of Lawson to the status of National Writer is well expressed by Walter Murdoch in a comment he made on a later writer: “If there is anything distinctively Australian, in nature or in human nature, to find it you will have to leave the city and wander in the outback” (qtd. in Plowman viii). Had Lawson never gone to Bourke his literary career would have been very different from what it was. He was a “towney” with limited experience of bush life; but immediately after the trip to Bourke when writing as a bushman, in his apparently “artless,” natural style, he achieved an effect of remarkable authenticity, which created a bond with his readers, wherever they were. In multicultural Australia the identification of Lawson with his “bush” subject matter now tends to obscure his real distinction: although his work is no longer valued for its “national characteristics,” except by sentimentalists, it tends to be read reductively as typifying the values of “Old Australia.” Critics have been slow to recognize that at its best his prose work is of a different creative order from that of his *Bulletin* contemporaries with whom he is most often placed.

Because Lawson’s prose and verse has a strong autobiographical element—and is directly autobiographical at times—the way in which his life has been read inevitably colours the way in which his writing is read. Like his contemporaries, biographers have shown little comprehension of how the conditions under which he sought to realize his literary ambitions contributed to his collapse. As the brief outline of his life given here may suggest, Lawson was ill-fitted to cope with adversity; and the sort of recognition that he received was as much a discouragement as a stimulus to his development as a writer. In the colonial society in which he set out to be a serious writer, there was an almost total absence of cultural influences and practical support that would have fostered his creativity. Although there may now be more understanding of Lawson’s psychology than in his lifetime, when his “bad behaviour” baffled and exasperated many who tried to help him, there is still no biography which adequately reveals the interplay of personal, social, economic and cultural factors which shaped his life and writing. It is close to a century since his death, but the tragic life of “the lonely boy who felt things deeply and wrote with his heart’s blood” (Lawson, *Autobiographical and Other Writings* 250) is yet to be written.

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