



### Book Review

Paul Eggert. *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson's While the Billy Boils*. Sydney: Sydney University Press / University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2013. ISBN 9781743320129

Paul Eggert, ed. *Henry Lawson: While the Billy Boils. The Original Newspaper Versions*. Explanatory Notes by Elizabeth Webby. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2013. ISBN 9781743320099

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This new scholarly edition by Professor Paul Eggert of Henry Lawson's most famous collection of short stories *While the Billy Boils*, originally published by Angus and Robertson in 1896, is supplemented by a monographic companion study, *Biography of a Book*, in which Eggert investigates the phases of production, distribution and reception of the book and meticulously traces the editorial and critical fortunes of the stories and sketches included in the collection, from their earliest single appearance in local colonial newspapers and magazines since the late 1880s, to the several 20th-century editions and selections, until the latest commercial printings in the first decade of the present century.

The result is an accurate and insightful study of a collection that definitely represents one of Lawson's highest and most versatile artistic expressions, as its enduring appeal to scholarly criticism and readership proves, but that has also often been misread on the grounds of generalizations and assumptions on Lawson as the iconic representative of the "legendary" 1890s. Eggert is keen on underlining that "the cultural environment of the late colonial period in Australia was more variegated than most of its subsequent interpreters were prepared to grant" (274) and his research proves that *While the Billy Boils* is not a "self-contained literary classic" (4), as was formerly assumed. The stylistic and experimental narrative techniques of several

stories, anticipating Modernist meta-narrative concerns, could not be properly understood by a critical tendency and readership that regarded Lawson's bush realism as a "defining document of the Australian cultural flowering of the 1890s" (4), an approach that has contributed to grounding its popularity but, at the same time, has obscured its innovative potentialities and stylistic audacity.

Therefore Eggert provides not only a re-reading of these now canonical stories but also a critical and historical re-assessment on the grounds of a new literary methodology in the field of Australian literary studies: the tracing of the "life" of a work. In following the biographical steps of *While the Billy Boils* he goes deep into Lawson's crucial early period (especially 1893-95), when Lawson's writing skills reached a peak, by reading the stories and sketches within the context of the changing political, social, intellectual and editorial scene of the last decade of the nineteenth century, and also within Lawson's personal and professional life. Eggert's editorial focus is meant to demonstrate that these aspects strongly influenced and shaped Lawson's writings and their revisions and it is intended to underline the importance of biographical fact and bibliographical chronology as relevant elements of debate in a scholarly edition that respects the principle that the author is not the only agent in the production of a book.

As the result of a broader book-historical approach, this new landmark edition also provides for the first time the original newspaper versions, prior to the book form, of the fifty-two stories comprising *While the Billy Boils*, and allows a new understanding of the whole collection by presenting the stories not in the sequence that was finalized in the Angus & Robertson 1896 edition but in the chronological order of their first newspaper publication (the earliest extant version because no holograph manuscripts have survived) so that they can be read in a light of comparison and reciprocal influence. Each story is supplied not only with a set of useful explanatory notes by Elizabeth Webby dispensing biographical, historical and linguistic information, but also with an accurate foot-of-the-page textual apparatus in which Eggert gives the means to compare each story with the subsequent life-time versions that have been collated with it, and discusses emendations of the copy-text and proof changes. Adding to this, at the end of each story a digital facsimile of the printer's copy is made available as a self-contained pdf so that, by combining consultation of the facsimiles with the foot-of-page listings, readers can get a clear idea of the collaborative processes of revision and correction.

Eggert starts from the assumption that the newspaper contexts and the publishers' expectations were fundamentally relevant for what and how Lawson wrote and revised, so the choice to give editorial focus to the earlier versions of the stories rather than to the later revised and corrected ones is made with the aim of giving evidence of the organic growth of contemporaneous works, and of their intertextual relationships of themes and motifs, but also with the intention of assessing the constraints and textual controls to which the stories were later submitted in order to meet the requirements of the publisher and allow Lawson to be paid. In Eggert's words "the feedback loop between the actual circumstances of Lawson's writing and sale of his stories and sketches" (334) should not be ignored; on the contrary, it should prove that many of his narrative and textual choices were more the responsive product of a specific cultural environment rather than the expression of it.

Hence Eggert is highly but constructively critical of the Australian tradition of scholarly books which he admits his own edition comes out of and that he aims at renovating with his own contribution. In particular he departs from Colin Roderick's 1972 and 1985 editions of Lawson's prose writings and from the old-fashioned editorial policy adopted by Roderick of providing as reading texts only the last-authorised versions which, of course, must have included also the changes made by editors and typesetters. If Roderick believed he was respecting in this way the authority of a text that had been "authorised" by Lawson, he seemed not to consider that the text had nonetheless been altered (by others or by the author himself under copy-editorial pact) from its original and more experimental version. Eggert's point is thus that this approach fails to respect the aesthetic qualities and historical witness of the early versions.

In this regard, an important aspect emphasized by Eggert's book-historical account, and revealed in particular by the original newspaper versions, is Lawson's linguistic responsiveness and his creative capacity to listen (in spite of his partial deafness) with fascination to the verbal habits, slang and dialect of his outback characters. As a man who had lived most of his life in the city, Lawson's experience of the bush was, as Eggert defines it, that of a "cultural traveller" who could write with intelligence and sensitiveness about life in the bush and absorb linguistic nuances that were lost or contained in the following reprintings of the collection.

As a result Eggert's *Biography of a Book* clears the ground for a new trend in criticism and proposes itself as a model for literary studies that is deeply respectful of empirical evidence. It is this study of the evidence that conducts Eggert in the reconstruction of the cultural and publishing environment of 1890s Sydney in which Lawson moved his first literary professional steps. Moreover, the account of the writing, critical reception and revision of the stories is implemented with a series of intertwined narratives about the life and career of Lawson that contribute to give the reader a wider and clearer picture of the author and his writing and induce to re-read the stories under a different light.

In the 13 chapters and 4 appendixes composing the "biography" of *While the Billy Boils* there is not only the re-proposal (and some unexpected reversals) of Lawson's early life instalments that have contributed to make him a legendary icon (his young republican fervour, his socialistic sympathies for the poor, the alcoholic excesses, his itinerant years in outback Bourke, in New Zealand, in London, his unbearable sadness and loneliness) but emphasis is also laid on personal and professional relationships that allow for further interpretation of his writing and reception: the relation with the editors of various newspapers (*Bulletin, Truth, Boomerang...*) in which Lawson had his stories published trying to respond to the expectations of their readership; the relation with the ambitious publisher, George Robertson, who was working hard to make Angus & Robertson a powerful Australian competitor to English publishers; the relation with Arthur Jose, employed by Robertson as copy-editor to curb for an English readership Lawson's experimental interpretation of Australian life and speech; and the relation with the young wife Bertha who became for some time Lawson's amanuensis. By analysing these empirical sources of enquiry Eggert proves that a new "work-grounded approach" (354) to literary studies, in which the history of works in their material and textual forms is brought together with the receptions of

those forms, is a necessary step towards a deeper understanding of a text, an understanding that is limited by a purely aesthetic or discursive approach.

In conclusion, what makes these two volumes a valuable and innovative source for scholars and readers of Lawson, and of Australian literature in general, is not only the fact that they are extremely rigorous, comprehensive, learned, and still thoroughly readable, but that they represent, and call for, a return to the literary. Eggert envisages a return, in reshaped forms, to the “engagement with the texture and history of literature” (30) after a long period of high Theory and wide-spreading discursive critique that had made the term “literary work” seem old-fashioned.

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