

***Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson's While the Billy Boils*, by Paul Eggert. New South Wales: Sydney University Press, 2013, 428 pp.**

**ISBN: 9781743320129 (pbk)**

**\$AUD 35.00**

**<http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/sup/9781743320143>**

***While the Billy Boils: The Original Newspaper Versions*, Ed. Paul Eggert with explanatory notes by Elizabeth Webby. New South Wales: Sydney University Press, 2013, 450 pp.**

**ISBN: 9781743320099 (Pbk)**

**\$AUD 25.00**

**<http://fmx01.ucc.usyd.edu.au/jspcart/cart/Product.jsp?&nCategoryID=1&nID=838>**

One of Australia's greatest works of fiction, Henry Lawson's *While the Billy Boils*, has a chequered and curious history that both precedes its publication as a book on 29 August 1896, then stretches forth into the present, through many different editions and changes of critical fortune for its author. The writing, publication, distribution and reception of Lawson's short story collection are the subject of a pair of new books. The first of these (and the first to be considered here) is *While the Billy Boils: The Original Newspaper Versions*, edited by one of Australia's leading textual scholars, Paul Eggert, with explanatory notes by Elizabeth Webby. The companion volume is Eggert's *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson's While the Billy Boils*, whose subject is 'the life of an Australian literary classic' (ix). Eggert's intention is to show 'that it can be productive, as a form of literary study, to follow the lives of works over time, both at the hands of the author and of his or her collaborators in publication, and in the reception of readers' (9).

In his edition of the fifty two stories in *While the Billy Boils*, Eggert does something radical, simple and revealing. Instead of following 'the blended sequencing of the stories and sketches that was finalised in early 1896 ... a straightforward chronological sequence by first newspaper publication has been adopted' (xix). Thus the edition begins with 'His Father's Mate', which first appeared in the *Bulletin* on 22 December 1888 and concludes with two stories from manuscript, 'For Auld Lang Syne' and 'The Geological Speiler'. This means that, except for the last two instances, the newspaper versions were Eggert's copy texts. He reckons, next, with the nature and reasons for the hundreds of changes made by the Angus & Robertson publisher's editor, Arthur Jose (and in some cases perhaps by George Robertson himself), to the stories that were collected as *While the Billy Boils*. Fortunately, as Eggert notes, the printer's copy of the book has survived, even if—predictably—there is no holograph manuscript of stories and sketches.

In 1892, the population of Sydney was approximately 400,000, sufficient to support ten metropolitan weeklies and another ten metropolitan fortnightlies and monthlies, let alone daily newspapers. The stories gathered in *While the Billy Boils* were originally published in disparate places. Some were published in the *New Zealand Mail*. New Zealand was a country Lawson visited before his marriage in 1895, and where he would fail to settle after it. Other sites of publication were the *Antipodean* (where 'The Bush Undertaker' first appeared), the *Boomerang*, the *Patriot*, the *Pahiatua Herald*, the *Truth* and the *Worker*. Lawson's relations with colleagues at the latter deteriorated after one of his stories, 'Baldy Thompson. A Sketch of a Squatter' (13 October 1894), published after the shearers' strike,

was deemed too sympathetic to the squatter who is its main character. Then, of course, there was the *Bulletin*, with which—perhaps—Lawson's name should not be so straightforwardly and indelibly linked. Of the fifty two stories in *While the Billy Boils*, 23 (less than half) were first published in the *Bulletin*.

As noted earlier, the first of them had been. 'His Father's Mate,' the longest story in the book, comprises six short chapters that strike chords that resound through much of what follows. The story begins with a lament for what has already been lost, from a wider historical and social field, then narrows to a particular and personal tragedy. This is the start: 'It was Golden Gully still, but golden in name only;' 'it is dreary even for an abandoned goldfield' (3). The place is not uninhabited. Golden Gully 'had its little community of fossickers, but they lent no life to the scene, they only haunted it' (4). The story ends with death, so beginning a sequence in which no principal character seems able to survive. Second up is the mawkish 'The Story of Malachi,' then 'Bogg of Geebung,' a case of wilfully buried identity ('he is, or must have been, a classical scholar' (35)). By the time that one of Arvie Aspinall's friends pays 'A Visit of Condolence' to Arvie's mother, the score is four from four and that grows when Arvie effectively dies twice, in a story indebted to Dickens (and to sentimental taste not reprehended at the turn of the century), in 'Arvie Aspinall's Alarm Clock.'

Among the first half dozen pieces is 'A Day on a Selection' subtitled 'A Sketch from Observation'. By transference, the word sketch suggests a swift, deft prose impression from life, as distinct from fictionalised episodes. However, as Eggert comments elsewhere, for Lawson the boundary between them was permeable. The seventh story is deservedly one of the most famous ever written in Australia. This story has been translated from prose to paint by Russell Drysdale, parodied by Frank Moorhouse and Murray Bail. Its generically-formed title is 'The Drover's Wife,' that is indicative not only of a wider than individual predicament, but of a country trying to discover the types that uniquely it has created. The story exemplifies what Ken Stewart sees as a signal quality of Lawson's vision, 'the hardness of things'. The drover of the title had been a squatter, until ruined by drought. He is forced to leave his family in isolation for long periods. It is 'nineteen miles to the nearest civilisation—a shanty on the main road' (61). The wife has suffered from an almost too ample portion of adversity—crows and eagles, a mad bullock, bushmen in the 'horrors' and villainous-looking sundowners. Yet this is a lesson in holding fast to the little that one has, poignantly registered in the ritual family walk each Sunday along a lonely bush track.

Another of Lawson's greatest stories follows, more pointed with its full title: 'A Christmas in the Far West; or, the Bush Undertaker'. Here a shepherd, in a lonely bush hut, is accompanied only by his dog, Five Bob. Obsessed with the need to disinter, then have a proper burial service for his dead mate, Brummy, he is beset by a giant black goanna, as well as an attack of what Lawson refers to as 'the horrors'. Lawson ends with a renowned and ironic benediction to the Australian bush: 'the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and much that is different from things in other lands' (86). The story is counterpointed by the sketch, 'In a Dry Season', one of the most doleful reckonings that Lawson made of the trip out west in 1892 in search of copy that was paid for by JF Archibald of the *Bulletin*. 'We'—for in some of these sketches Lawson finds his companionable point of view in the first person plural—'crossed the Macquarie, a narrow, muddy gutter with a dog

swimming across and three goats interested'. We (readers as well) come to 'the other side of Nevertire' (the proper name a blessing to his art on which Lawson need not dwell) (91).

The next story of Lawson's to be published, in the *Bulletin* on 15 April 1893, 'Mitchell: A Character Sketch,' introduces a plausible scapegrace who would make numerous reappearances. Indeed he soon returns in 'On the Edge of the Plain' and 'Mitchell Doesn't Believe in the Sack.' Separating the first Mitchell story from the next pair is a piece with two subtitles, 'A Bushman's Funeral' and 'A Sketch from Life'. It is better known as 'The Union Buries Its Dead'. Another tale of hidden identity (from whatever obscure sense of shame), this is a story that proclaims itself a sketch and has an actual incident of drowning as one of its sources. Part of its artful story-telling involves the annulment of details at the very point of their inclusion: 'I have left the wattle out because it wasn't there. I have also omitted the heart-broken mate ...' (105). The effect is not so much anti-sentimentalism, as of nihilism offered with the semblance of jest.

'Macquarie's Mate' has a trick ending, but its main business is the vehicle of the narrative, more than its subject. What carries the story is how time during gatherings of men is passed by talk. That points to the title chosen for the whole collection, with its intimations of sociable campfire yarning. For instance, in 'Brummy Usen', we read of how 'We'd get going about men getting lost in the bush or going away and being reported for dead' (105). Lawson takes it from there. The companion sketch to 'In a Dry Season', 'In a Wet Season' (*Bulletin*, 2 December 1893) begins 'It was raining—"general rain"' and continues 'the train left Bourke, and then began the long, long agony of scrub and wire fence' (202). Then, 'after Nyngan the bush grew darker and drearier and the plains more like ghastly oceans' (205). The expressionist note struck here will make us less surprised by the unexpected reference to 'the dominant note of Australian scenery' that comes next—Marcus Clarke's famous reflection on bush landscapes (205).

In his *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson's While the Billy Boils*, Paul Eggert argues that the work he edited (mostly) from 'the original newspaper versions', 'cannot be adequately understood whether approached in the traditional way as a self-contained literary classic or, alternatively, as the discursive expression of a rich nationalist mindset of the 1890s' (4). The position to which he is committed is the 'advent from the early 1990s of the new book-history movement' (7). Justly he writes of the consequences of allowing cultural studies to absorb literary studies. The cost would be to leave 'the essential thing that had brought us to literary study in the first place unattended, almost uninspected' (13). He argues—almost, one might say, from common sense—for 'a textual genesis in which writers are their own readers. And editors, agents and typesetters become readers well before the general public reception starts' (14).

Eggert now advances one of the most fascinating and contentious literary-historical arguments in his book. He writes that '[w]hat I call the Long 1890s carried on until the late 1950s and after, when the cultural nationalists gave it a definition that expressed their own contemporary ideals' (16). There have, of course, been many revisionist accounts of the literature and ethos of the 1890s, emphasising—for instance not mateship and iconoclasm—

but sentimentality, misogyny, xenophobia. Eggert might contend that most of these occurred specifically in reaction to the so-called liberal nationalists of the 1950s—Vance and Nettie Palmer, A.A. Phillips, Russel Ward—rather than the writers of the 1890s. Indeed, much later, that is what Eggert does: ‘when critics talk about, say, the nationalist ideology to be found in Lawson’s or other *Bulletin* writings they are just as likely to be referring to a formation of the 1950s, as of the decade they believe themselves to be discussing.’ What he might have also considered are inter-war complaints of the failure of all the transformative promise of the 1890s, figured eloquently, for instance, in C.E.W. Bean’s *War Aims of a Plain Australian* (1945). Maybe Eggert’s Long 1890s will ignite a conference.

*Biography of a Book* rightly does not shy from what is sometimes derided as merely context. Eggert inquires into ‘how publishers in London and Edinburgh operated in a practical workaday manner to secure their territories, to promote their titles, and to organise their sales and distribution to and within the colonies’ (19). Noted, also, is how ‘a remarkable burst of physical infrastructure developed in the 1880s in the Australian colonies suddenly provided marketing conditions for the successful establishment of an Australian publishing industry’ (29). Incidentally, it ‘also facilitated Lawson’s own travelling’ (29). The journey that Lawson took west was on the railway line from Sydney to Bourke that was completed in 1885. More expansively, and as an earnest of his admiration and forgiving affection, Eggert judges that

Lawson helped to imagine an Australian environment largely through inhabiting the idiom and tones of its people, especially those of the lower and mainly male echelons of his little-differentiated bush and city locales. Lawson naturalised the country laconically, not through reflecting on, or self-consciously or programmatically pursuing, a sense of its exceptionalism. (26)

‘Little-differentiated’? The implication is of how sparse the physical furniture of Lawson’s stories is, wherever these stories are set. The equine representation too: David Ferguson in the *Review of Reviews* complained ‘Not one horse in the book, from title page to imprint ... not one horse’ (168).

Eggert begins with a fifteen-page chronology, taking us from Lawson’s birth at Grenfell on 17 June 1867 to the sale of the Angus & Robertson business archives to the Mitchell Library in 1977. The first chapters trace Lawson’s early life and limited education. There was a circulating library in Gulgong (where the family moved in 1871) and the youthful Lawson read and was influenced by the fiction of Brett Harte and Mark Twain. When he moved to Sydney with his mother, where in 1888 she founded the journal *Dawn*, Lawson found as his subjects ‘poverty and politics’. However, as Eggert argues, ‘overt advocacy of radical positions would find no place in his prose fiction, although political radicalism would be its nostalgically understood or mutely protested background, one clustering around the idea of mateship’ (47). In fact, for all that Lawson once exultantly warned that ‘Blood will stain the wattle,’ his stance is more one of resignation to what will come to be, stoicism in readiness for trials to which he will not feel himself equal.

Eggert brings a thoughtful sympathy to the personal element behind the making of Lawson's stories: 'He must have spent a good deal of his working life either thinking about what to write and then writing it' (58). Of another often urged complaint against Lawson's fiction, Eggert suggests that there was

... a straightforward book-historical reason why Lawson's story-tellers and characters do not become more coherently imagined from one story to the next. It is simply that Lawson sold and was paid for the stories individually. (59)

By 1893, however, Eggert judges that a discernible story pattern had emerged. Lawson's characters were 'settling down into a shared acceptance of hardship, of youth lost, of passions put behind, of comic consolations' (104). Nearly a decade of his finest work lay in front of him, culminating with the four linked stories concerning the travails of an Australian marriage, setting the bush, and featuring Joe and Mary Wilson. Lawson wrote and first published these stories in London.

Eggert writes discerningly of that productive and troubled sojourn. In 1901 the Joe Wilson stories came to the notice of Joseph Conrad who shared with Lawson a literary agent, J.B. Pinker. Conrad wrote that 'Lawson's sketches are beyond praise—the more so in that in such a subject it takes a first-rate man not to break through the thin ice of sentimentalism' (192). (Three decades on, Ernest Hemingway ordered the two-volume set of *While the Billy Boils* in the Cape Travellers' Library Edition. They were still in his home in Cuba when he died). The connection that Lawson established with *Blackwood's Magazine* was less profitable or productive than either party wanted. These matters are laid out in the ninth chapter of *Biography of a Book*, 'Who Made the Money and How Much? Or, Why Lawson Went to England.'

Not for the first time, Eggert is at issue here with the distinguished critic, biographer and editor, Colin Roderick. In regard to Lawson's income, Eggert tartly remarks that 'Unfortunately Roderick's biography ... suffers from a chronic under-documentation of its factual claims' (208). Eggert is also unimpressed with the editorial methods of Roderick's two-volume collection of Lawson's stories, compared with his own: 'Roderick's prose volumes provide only clear reading texts, chosen on the same, last-authorised [version] principle' (xxviii). At the same time, Roderick's contributions are generously acknowledged, not least his part in the last Lawson revival. Roderick's selection *Fifteen Stories* (1959) had sold 60,000 copies by the end of 1961. Eggert points out (as his Long 1890s get even longer) that setting aside Lawson's identification with that decade, 'in terms of sales and reading experiences, the post-war period, especially from the late 1950s until the end of the 1980s, saw the peak of his popularity' (271). Coinciding with the end of the latter decade, deconstructionism came to English departments in Australia. Contempt for the national literature was one of the sidelines for some of its practitioners. Eggert makes the point more gently when he writes that 'post-structuralist theory ... taught a generation of Honours and PhD students to condescend to [bio-bibliographical study] as merely philological and as hailing from a long-discredited, positivist past' (320).

Eggert ably traces Lawson's critical reception, from the first reviews in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Britain ('a very considerable number'), to the work of H.M. Green, with his famous, almost circular pronouncement that 'Lawson is not only one of the best of all Australian writers, he is the most Australian of them all' (281). Following Green was A.A. Phillips (Senior English Master at Wesley College, but never headmaster, as Eggert thinks) for whom Lawson had 'to find just how little plot he could afford to use without the collapse of the structure', then, in the 1980s, Harry Heseltine, Brian Kiernan and Brian Matthews. *Biography of a Book* ends with advocacy: 'the work emerges, not as a transhistorical essence, not as an aesthetic object ideally shaped for New Critical Study, but as a series of historical processes' (352). Eggert has admirably supported his contention. The unconventional 'biography' and the new edition of *While the Billy Boils* are admirable. Quibbles? Might there have been more of Lawson's social interactions, not only with Robertson, but with those mates who both supported and led him astray? Elizabeth Webby's notes to the stories are first-class, but a degree of repetition could have been lessened by a glossary. Finally, something on the translations of *While the Billy Boils* in translation would have been useful. That said, the two books are critical and editorial triumphs.

### Works Cited

Stewart, Ken. "'The Loaded Dog": A Celebration'. *Australian Literary Studies*, XI, 1 (1983): 152-161.

*Peter Pierce, Monash University*