

## ‘From Mudgee Hills to London Town’: A Critical Biography of Henry Lawson

On 23 April 1900, at his studio in New Zealand Chambers, Collins Street, Melbourne, John Longstaff began another commissioned portrait. Since his return from Europe in the mid-1890s, when he had found his native Victoria suffering a severe depression, such commissions had provided him with the mainstay to support his young family.

While abroad he had studied in the same Parisian atelier as Toulouse-Lautrec and a younger Australian, Charles Conder. He had acquired an interest in the new ‘plein air’ impressionism from another Australian, Charles Russell, and he had been hung regularly in the Salon and also in the British Academy. Yet the successful career and stimulating opportunities Longstaff could have assumed if he had remained in Europe eluded him on his return to his own country. At first he had moved out to Heidelberg, but the famous figures of the local ‘plein air’ school, like Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton, had been drawn to Sydney during the depression. Longstaff now lived at respectable Brighton, and while he had painted some canvases that caught the texture and tonality of Australian life—most memorably his study of the bushfires in Gippsland in 1893—local dignitaries were his more usual subjects.

This commission, though, was unusual. It had come from J. F. Archibald, editor of the not fully respectable Sydney weekly, the *Bulletin*, and it was to paint not another Lord Mayor or Chief Justice,

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but a writer of verses, stories and sketches named Henry Lawson. Although he was only thirty-three (the age Longstaff had been on his return) Lawson was already admired and popular throughout Australasia, and was now off to try his luck in the literary metropolis of London.

Lawson with his young family was en route from Sydney when he received the telegram from Archibald asking him to sit for Longstaff while his ship was in Melbourne. In Lawson's mind, this was a voyage he had started much earlier when, as the eldest son of a selector on a worn-out goldfield, he had yearned 'for something better—something higher'.<sup>1</sup> Now, at last, he was going 'from Mudgee Hills to London Town'<sup>2</sup> and, he hoped, to wider fame, or at least financial security.

Painter and sitter might have found much to talk about, if time had not been so short, and the writer so hard of hearing, for many threads of personal and cultural history crossed with their meeting. Both had been born on the goldfields, had grown up on farms, and remembered the days of the bullock drays and Cobb and Co. coaches. The previous year, in the *Bulletin*, Lawson musing on the theme 'If I Could Paint' had mentioned first of all Longstaff's 'Breaking the News', the canvas—based on an incident remembered from the painter's childhood in the goldmining town of Clunes—that had won Longstaff his scholarship to Paris in 1887, the same year that Lawson first had verses accepted by the *Bulletin*.

The owner of the *Bulletin* had purchased the painting, and later his paper carried some of the trade advertisements that Longstaff, in difficult times, had designed. And Lawson's writings, which emphasised the 'weird melancholy' of the bush, had their correspondences with paintings: with the '9 x 5' sketches by the 'plein air' impressionists of the Heidelberg school which captured what was characteristic of Australian life and landscape, and also with Longstaff's more academic paintings, which so much appealed to the writer. Writing of Longstaff, Bernard Smith sees 'a curious survival of the melancholy interpretation of Australian life and nature' that had characterised earlier periods in

1 'A Fragment of Autobiography' (MS. 1903-06), in *Henry Lawson: Complete Works*, compiled and edited by Leonard Cronin with introductions by Brian Kiernan, 2 vols (Lansdowne, Sydney, 1984), I, p.30. Subsequent volume and page references included in the text in parentheses refer to this edition.

2 The title of a manuscript (1913) continuing Lawson's autobiography, in *Complete Works*, II, pp.945-51.

local art. For Longstaff, as for Lawson, 'Australia was a land of flood, fire, and famine'.<sup>3</sup>

They could have talked about the difficulties they had experienced as fellow artists in Australia; and how, although a new century had just opened and Federation was approaching (with the first Parliament to meet in Melbourne early the next year) they could share no optimism about fulfilling their ambitions in their own country.

Lawson's prolific output of verses, stories and sketches about the people and the ways of life he had known in the pioneering days and the present, in the country and the city, had been taken to heart by the public across Australia and in New Zealand. Almost every week, for over a decade, a new ballad or lyric or radical song, a story or sketch or article had appeared in the papers: the *Town and Country Journal*, the *Boomerang*, the *Sydney Worker*, *Truth*, or the *Bulletin*. And there were his books published by Angus and Robertson which had sold well, verse in *In the Days When the World Was Wide*, prose in *While the Billy Boils*, and new collections of verse and prose were appearing around the time of his departure. His send-off from Sydney had been momentous, attended by the best-known literati associated with the bohemian Dawn and Dusk Club and the *Bulletin*, including its literary editor A. G. Stephens who, once again, hailed Lawson as the country's most 'representative' writer.

Yet, though he had been extraordinarily successful by the measures of popularity and fame (and had received a number of interested enquiries from English publishers) Lawson had not been able to live by, and devote himself exclusively to, writing in Australia. Now, with the assistance of Earl Beauchamp, the Governor of New South Wales, David Scott Mitchell, the wealthy bibliophile, and George Robertson, his publisher, he was going to London, where he hoped this might be possible.

Longstaff also craved the success and wider recognition that Lawson was seeking. The following year, the commission to paint his grandly gloomy 'Burke and Wills' was to take him to London (because the donor, assuming no colonial would be capable of filling the commission, had

3 Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1962), pp.139–40; Nina Murdoch, *Portrait in Youth of Sir John Longstaff 1861–1941* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1948).

stipulated it be painted there), where he began a successful career as a fashionable portraitist, and eventually attained a knighthood. His very success prevented his celebrating in paint the Australian landscape he extolled on a later, brief return. But on his departure in 1901, the same Earl Beauchamp, his term as Governor over, commissioned a portrait of Edward VII as a gift to the State's National Gallery. This and a companion portrait of Queen Alexandria were hung together with those of Lawson and the painter's wife. Lawson had seen his still wet the morning after his sitting, and again in the Gallery after his return from London:

O Scotty, have you visited the Picture Gallery,  
And did you see the portraits of the King and Queen and me?  
The portraits made by Longstaff, and the pictures done by Jack  
Of the King and Queen and Lawson and the lady all in black?

'Perhaps', he wrote long after, 'the reason why I have never seen it since is that it is, in a way, connected with the tragedy of my life.'<sup>4</sup>

A studio photograph, taken in Sydney in 1902, soon after Lawson's return from London, shows him as alert, purposeful, his eyes magnetic. Yet Longstaff's painting expresses the personality we know from Lawson's writing more tellingly than the camera. The painter posed his subject conventionally, and somewhat stiffly, so that sitting upright in ready-made suit and uncomfortably high collar (though Longstaff omitted the starched cuffs), with his pipe constrained to his lap, Lawson gives the impression of awkwardness, a sense that he is not in his natural attire or attitude.

The earthy colours suggest textures other than those associated with the complacently bourgeois civilisation Longstaff's commissioned subjects usually represented. Instead of a confident, prosperous, smiling public face, we see a private, withdrawn, vulnerable man, handsome but haggard for someone in the traditional prime of his life. The expression of the mouth is masked by a full moustache, which accentuates the deep, soft brown eyes that everyone remembered

4 'The King and Queen and I' (*Bulletin*, 1905) and 'The Longstaff Portrait', (MS. 1910), *Complete Works*, II, p.236; p.927.

Lawson by, eyes which look not outward, as might have been expected of someone of Lawson's early achievement now on his way to London, but inwardly, as though on the past, and on another Australia than the country he was leaving on the eve of Federation.

His earliest memories, as he wrote in the autobiography commissioned by George Robertson after his return from England, were of the tent he had been born in on the Grenfell goldfields—though he only remembered it from the age of three when the tent (or hut, because it had been extended in bark) was the temporary family home at New Pipeclay, outside Mudgee. Gold had been discovered there in the 1860s, at Golden Gully, and gold, or the hope of it, had affected his family's fortunes and movements in Henry's early childhood.

His father, Nils Hertzberg Larsen, a Norwegian ship's officer, had jumped ship to join the earlier rushes in Victoria. Eventually he had made his way to Golden Gully, where he met Louisa, one of the daughters of Henry Albury, proprietor of a public house on nearby Sapling and Gully field. They married in Mudgee in 1866, when Louisa was nineteen, and Nils thirty-five, and joined the rush to Grenfell. Their first child was born there on 17 June 1867 and named Henry Lawson, not Larsen. Nils, or Peter as he was called in Australia, and Louisa returned to New Pipeclay with the infant shortly after.

Louisa's family had settled in the Mudgee area before her birth in 1848. Both her parents had been emigrants from England. Henry Albury had arrived with his farm labourer parents from Kent in 1838, and in 1845 he had married Harriet Winn, born at Norwich. Louisa, the second of their seven children, was born at Guntawang station near Mudgee, where her father was then working.

Henry Albury, the writer's grandfather, was not susceptible to gold fever like his Norwegian son-in-law, and his way of sharing in the prosperity that followed the rushes was to buy the good will of a public house. It was to this 'shanty', the Albury home, that the Larsens, now Lawsons, returned from Grenfell. Peter re-erected the tent on a two-acre paddock adjoining the house, and after the birth of a second child, Charles, in 1869 he built a hardwood cottage. He worked with his father-in-law around the district until in 1871 he finally persuaded his wife to join the rush to Gulgong, some miles to the north, that had broken out the preceding year. Then four, young Henry could remember the excitement of packing and moving to Gulgong, the film-set frontier town

that is preserved today, and the trip to Sydney after his father struck gold. In 1873, the family returned to New Pipeclay (soon to be returned to its Aboriginal name of Eurunderee) and Peter took up a selection under the Robertson Acts—forty acres adjoining the two they had previously occupied—and a third son, Peter, was born. The following year, ironically, the rush to neighbouring Log Paddock brought prospectors to dig up the land that Louisa had hoped her digger husband would settle down to farm.

Having been born on the goldfields, and thus historically linked to Eureka and the 'roaring days', was an important part of the romance in the imaginative young Henry's mind—part of the family romance he grew up with—like being descended from mysterious Gipsy and heroic Viking forbears. But such reveries could not compensate for the unromantic reality of his childhood. The predominant note in his memories is of inner desolation, as though in response to the abandoned diggings all around.

For the visitor today, Mudgee on the winding Cudgegong River is a pleasant and prosperous country centre with wide streets of broad-verandahed homes, stately old hotels and shops. Approached through Sofala, Hill End and other picturesque mining townships, including Gulgong, 'the town on the ten dollar bill', it is the hub of a region rich in historical associations, chiefly Lawsonian. And although only the chimney of the Lawson house at Eurunderee still stands, it is surrounded by lush varied countryside, with cattle grazing on the river flats, vineyards on the slopes, and, in the distance, the enclosing blue hills. It is an archetypal Australian landscape of the kind that generations of artists have brought us to appreciate as painterly.

But for Lawson as a child it was, as he recalls it in his autobiography, 'a miserable little hell', and he returns repetitively, as though still haunted by their pathos, to memories of his father returning home after dark, and a full day's work elsewhere, to labour on the selection (with the ground so hard that in desperation he tried breaking it up with blasting powder)—and the constant, bitter quarrels between his parents.

The father was always working and away from home on contracting jobs for increasingly extended periods; and the mother, as well as having the strain of bringing up the children alone and running the selection, tried to supplement their meagre income by dressmaking. From the age of eight their eldest son had a heavy round of chores before and after

school. At eleven he was taken out of school for a time—to help his father build the new schoolhouse at Eurunderee.

As well as disruptions to his education, and the dubious benefit of learning from Irish National Readers under Mr Tierney, the boy was suffering from deafness, and when he was sent to school in Mudgee was regarded as ‘barmy’ by the others. In 1877, when Henry was ten, the twins Gertrude and Henrietta were born, further increasing the strain on Louisa’s and the family’s resources. Henrietta died the next year, Louisa published a poem in the local paper, which spurred Henry’s first attempts at verse. At the age of thirteen, Henry left school to help his father with contracts in the Mudgee area. Around this time he made a visit to Sydney to consult a doctor about his deafness and then worked with his father on building contracts in the Blue Mountains. In 1883 Louisa leased the selection, moved to Sydney, and sent for Henry who was apprenticed as a carriage hand with Hudson Brothers at Clyde.

These are the bare, familiar facts of Henry Lawson’s early life and family background. The popularity of his writings—in which he provided many versions, direct and indirect, of these early years—and the fact that he has been the subject of more biographical studies than any other Australian writer mean that his formative years are the most familiar. From his directly autobiographical writings, and the personal elements in his fiction and verse, as well as from the records provided by members of his family, biographers have constructed their interpretations of his personality: what it must have been like to have been Henry Lawson, to have been born on the goldfields, grown up on a selection, had a few broken years of schooling made miserable by deafness, then the abrupt transition to the grinding poverty of the city.

Such experiences have A. G. Stephens’s ‘representative’ quality, in terms of their typicality for thousands of others, who responded to his writings when they appeared, and who had themselves observed the transition from a predominantly rural to an urban-industrial Australia. But these factors alone do not explain Lawson’s emergence as a writer—why this boy, unlike those thousands of others, should have become the imaginative historian of these experiences and these changes.

All who have attempted to explain this are agreed on Louisa’s commanding influence during the future writer’s formative years. Peter,

who Henry describes in the autobiography as 'the kindest, hardest working man' he had ever met, is a benign though often absent figure in his memories of childhood. In Louisa's own accounts, and those of her daughter Gertrude, which echo her mother's, she decided to take up the selection after the return from Gulgong, at first running it and finally leasing it to start a new life for herself and the children in the city. Whereas Gertrude's sympathies are with Louisa, Henry's are with his father, and in the autobiography Louisa is most often referred to detachedly as 'the mother'.

Henry had been ten when Gertrude was born. This gap between them, combined with the itinerant pattern of Henry's life in his later teens meant that she would not have known him well. But as Brian Matthews has pointed out, her rambling and repetitious accounts in manuscript in the Mitchell Library, although frequently misleading about her brother's life, provide a strong impression of her mother's personality. Indeed, their vagueness and repetitiveness are their value, because behind Gertrude the reader can sense Louisa *talking*.<sup>5</sup>

Ostensibly, some of Gertrude's accounts are of Henry and the rest of the family, but all are dominated by the figure of Louisa, and all agree in their details and phrasing when recounting some common incidents, as though Gertrude is setting down from memory what she had heard over and over from her mother. How she had to have the selection put in her husband's name because there was no Married Women's Property Act then. How she kept Peter working on the farm by the sheer strength of her will. How she organised the establishment of the provisional school for the neighbourhood; and how she decided after her second child that there would be no more until they found a better way of life in the city.

Although there are factual inconsistencies between Henry's and Gertrude's accounts, and within Gertrude's own, hers have their value in the version of the family romance they convey. Every family has its romance and each child locates itself in the family's history in its terms: 'When your grandfather was still a young man ...', 'When I was a girl ...', 'When your father and I first met ...', 'When you were

5 Brian Matthews, 'Louisa and Henry and Gertie and the Drover's Wife', *Australian Literary Studies* (May 1980), pp.286-97. [See also his *Louisa* (McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1987).]



still just a baby ...'. A romance not because it is untrue, necessarily, or exaggerated, but because the details of time and place, often vague and confused in the telling, are less important than the imaginative significance the story holds for teller and listener.<sup>6</sup>

From the stories Louisa told Gertrude—who records them with all the time-worn embellishments that look tawdrily novelettish when set down on the page—we can readily imagine how Louisa perceived herself and wanted others to see her. As the sensitive, solitary adolescent who found solace meditating and declaiming her poetry in the bush, where she had her sacred place. When this was invaded by a black snake, which she dubbed Judas, she killed it and carried it away to burn so that it would not defile her shrine. As the strongly independent daughter, too proud to go into service (the only employment available), who walked out of chapel in protest at a bigoted sermon. As the tall, slender bush girl, the darling of the diggers at her father's shanty, who wanted to get up a subscription so that she could have the voice that so delighted them trained in London, but whose mother refused because she had a horror of her children 'going public'. How Peter Larsen won her hand, to his rivals' surprise, when he came upon her sitting on a log and weeping over her lot in this tiny rural community—though Henry preferred a more stirring version involving a disturbance at the Alburys' shanty with the plucky little Norwegian sailor to the rescue.

As well as being gifted with her voice, and poetic temperament, she was also a splendid horsewoman who took command of a runaway team of horses pulling the local coach. And there was also the story which must have been told many times, and eventually written and published as a short story by Louisa herself in 1915 (long after her son's 'The Drover's Wife' had appeared) about how, when her husband was away one evening, there was a suspicious noise and the glimpse of a gloved hand at the window; and how, taking a batten from the sofa and the dog in the other hand, she confronted the prowler, sending him off, but then huddled with the children in the same bed all night with the

6 'Family Romance' is not used here in any psychoanalytic sense. For a Freudian interpretation of Lawson's life and work, see Xavier Pons, 'Henry Lawson's Literary Vocation', *Meanjin* 2 (1980), 237–48. [See also his *Out of Eden: Henry Lawson's Life and Works—A Psychoanalytical View* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1984).]

dog on guard at its foot.<sup>7</sup>

These were some of the stories we can assume the children grew up on and heard often—so often that Gertrude knew them by heart. The family romance about the earlier lives of parents, relatives and neighbours mingled with the children's own immediate memories, and so extended itself into their generation. For example, Henry's reminiscences about his grandfather incorporate Louisa's stories about how her father would bring home presents for herself and his other children and then hide them. Such stories mingled with his own memories of Harry Albury, as his memories of the drovers down on the river flat who put 'whisker-seed' on his younger brother Charlie, or of the Gulgong rush, mingled with the previous generation's lore about 'the roaring days' before his birth, providing him with the 'visitable past' that he entered so often in his writings.

Convinced (as Gertrude wrote) that she was 'born to better things', Louisa was the dominant, indeed domineering parent—the 'Chieftainess' as Lawson referred to her in later life. Yet she was also given to 'strange fits of abstraction' when, according to her daughter, she would retire and 'vegetate' for days, before rousing herself and driving everyone before her again. From all accounts and interpretations, it would seem clear that Louisa was a 'good' mother to Henry, in the ironic psychological sense of imbuing her first-born with her own dissatisfactions and aspirations 'for something better—something higher' (I, p.30), especially her literary aspirations. He attributes the initial encouragement he had to write to his mother, and she is remembered most fondly as reading *Robinson Crusoe*, Poe, Gordon, and *For the Term of His Natural Life* to the young boys. Dickens, Cervantes, Bret Harte and Twain are other authors referred to in the autobiography.

Gertrude also remembers an edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which reinforces the impression that Lawson was not as culturally deprived as many others who also grew up on selections and had only a few, broken years of formal education. As well as Adam Lindsay Gordon (probably with Marcus Clarke's preface and its phrase 'weird

7 'The Senior Sergeant: A True Incident at Eurundee Farm 1822', *Woman's Budget*, 8 July 1915. A clipping of this story is in the Louisa Lawson Scrapbooks, Mitchell Library (ML) A 1895; beneath it Gertrude has written, 'A true incident on the farm. I was five years old but remember it distinctly'.

melancholy' to describe the bush, which was to echo throughout Lawson's writings), we could also expect there had been lots of Henry Kendall. Louisa had become fascinated by the native-born poet and his struggle for recognition. She dreamed of communing with him about poetry—her poetry which she had been writing since she was a girl. The move to Sydney took place in the year of Kendall's death, and in one version Gertrude tells of Louisa being called to the city by the spirit of the poet. In his fragment of autobiography, Henry refers to there once having been another 'Barmy Harry' in Sydney (Kendall), which suggests something of a family cult of the 'misunderstood' identifying themselves with the poet.

Shortly after her arrival in the city, Louisa set about organising a campaign to have a memorial erected over Kendall's grave—at a time when she was having great difficulty in establishing herself and her young family. Within five years, through slaving at dressmaking, she had acquired a small news-sheet for Henry to be the nominal editor of, the *Republican*, and founded a paper for women, the *Dawn*. Despite all the economic difficulties, the forceful personality, that could not find its outlets in the country, assertively found itself in the city, especially in the cause of women's suffrage. It also made its demands on her eldest son.

When the parents had first separated, Henry had stayed with his father, working first in the Mudgee area then at Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains. The relationship between Louisa and her husband remains a matter for conjecture, with conflicting impressions having been given by contemporary and later commentators. But what is clear is that his mother's sending for Henry to join the rest of the family in the city proved crucial to his development, by exposing him to a productively confusing set of stimuli.

When Louisa moved to the centre of Sydney, having first of all attempted to start a boarding house at Marrickville, Henry's wages as an apprentice carriage hand paid only the rent. Yet Louisa's aspirations for her family persevered. After rising before dawn, walking some miles to the train, working all day and making his way home again, Henry was enrolled in night school to better himself—paying his fees through overtime. 'My tribe wanted a gentleman, or the appearance of a gentleman, in the family, but they wanted every penny I could earn also', he remarks bitterly in the autobiography (I, p.33). The shy, sensitive, awkward bush lad, as he later looked back on himself in those days,

had swapped the drudgery of the selection for that of the city.

However, on moving to Sydney, Louisa had also, initially through the Progressive Spiritualist Lyceum, brought the family into contact with an intellectual milieu that only the city could offer. Her home in Phillip Street became in these years a meeting place for radicals of many persuasions—spiritualism and secularism, socialism, republicanism, and the feminism which became Louisa's, and for a time Henry's, preferred cause in the nationalistic Utopian mood that was rising in response to economic difficulties and the moves towards Federation.

For Henry, these were unsettled years of moving back and forth between Sydney and the Blue Mountains, where his father remained, and also working for brief periods in Newcastle and Melbourne—where he went to have treatment for his deafness. Although he twice failed the examinations to qualify for the Public Service or university entry, Louisa had succeeded in imbuing him with her aspirations for something higher, and he described himself as always hanging around the School of Arts library.

He was also writing, and his first success came when the *Bulletin* accepted 'A Song of the Republic' and 'Golden Gully' in 1887. At the age of twenty, the 'Bush boy who was skinny city work-boy in patched pants and blucher boots struggling on the edge of the unemployment gulf' (I, p.34) had been published, and in the *Bulletin*, the most national among the plethora of radical papers that appeared in the 1880s and 1890s to propagate a wide range of causes. Lawson was later to write for a number of these: as editor, for the *Republican* (which became the *Nationalist* before folding), the *Boomerang* and the *Worker* in Brisbane, the *Sydney Worker*, as well as for mass circulation papers such as *The Town and Country Journal* or *Truth*.

Many of the young poet's contemporaries found such poems as 'A Song of the Republic' and, in the *Bulletin* the following year, 'Faces in the Street' and 'The Army of the Rear' memorable expressions of widely shared radical sentiments. When, much later in his life, Lawson recalled writing them, he deplored their 'deadly-in-earnest ring' and 'thunderous resignation' (II, p.945). Today we might agree with his mature judgement, while still valuing these oft-quoted protest verses for their encapsulation of a past ethos; but the equally familiar bush

ballad he wrote around the same time, like 'Andy's Gone with Cattle' (*Town and Country Journal*, 1888) retain their simple appeal. Varied as his early verses were, they would have struck a common chord for readers then—that of expectations fulfilled, now the long-awaited native Australian literature was emerging with the verses of 'Banjo' Paterson, Victor Daley, Barcroft Boake, E. J. Brady and other writers for the *Bulletin* whose ranks Lawson had joined.

The rush of verses that followed his first publication in the *Bulletin* showed Lawson responding to a range of traditional and contemporary popular models. Kipling, Moore, Burns, Tennyson, Hood, Poe and Bret Harte were among those noticed when his first collection appeared. Other detectable influences are the poets his mother was fond of: traditional Irish and Scots ballads, which by this time had been adapted to produce the 'bush ballad' frequently found in the *Bulletin* and other papers; the declamatory protest verse found in radical papers; and the sentimentally 'concerned' popular verse of the kind exemplified by G. R. Sims's 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse'. Instead of settling into one measure or manner Lawson wrote across the wide range of popular models.<sup>8</sup>

However, even his first reviewers regarded Lawson more highly as a prose writer. Whereas his verse is most often conventional, his prose writings, since their first appearance, have been valued for their freshness and individuality, their direct, 'artless' realism and (what some intended by this seemingly unflattering epithet) his break with literary conventions prevailing in a late Victorian colonial culture.

His first published story, which he said was also his first attempt at prose of any description (though his recollections of his own work were not always accurate) was 'His Father's Mate'. This displays a conflict between the conventionally 'literary', through the stilted gentility of the style in its opening and a melodramatic development, and the 'realistic' in terms of the more direct, dramatic representation of life

8 For contemporary reviews, see Colin Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson: Criticism* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972). For accounts of popular verse and influences on Lawson see Edgar Waters, 'Ballads and Popular Verse' in G. Dutton (ed.), *The Literature of Australia* (Penguin, Ringwood, revised edition 1976), pp.293–306; Colin Roderick, 'Lawson the Poet' in Leon Cantrell, ed., *Bards, Bohemians and Bushmen* (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1976), pp.203–17; Graeme Davison, 'Sydney and the Bush: An Urban Context for the Australian Legend', *Historical Studies* 71 (1978), 191–209.

in Golden Gully. The opening, with its heavily narrational manner, ponderous personification ('poor tortured earth') and dragged-in classical allusion to Timon, suggests that the young author is trying to write up to some fine, if dull, literary models.

This conventionality reveals his awareness of the literary beyond what we might have imagined from knowledge of his limited formal education. Like his other early pieces in prose, this first story disposes of assumptions that his minimal, broken schooling may have been a benefit, allowing him to remain an untutored and unspoilt natural. Instead, the melodramatic shaping through the concealed relationship of the brothers, the return (but just too late) of the prodigal son, and the Victorian pathos of the child's death—a subject that continued to appeal to Lawson, partly one suspects because it licensed self-pity for his own childhood—show how literary he was, in prose as well as verse, at the start.

In other early pieces he can be seen as casting around among various models and influences for the technical means and authorial voice to express his concerns. Although he said that his first 'real, living character' was Peter M'Kenzie of 'Payable Gold'<sup>9</sup>—the story of an old digger on Log Paddock written a couple of years later—the Isley of 'His Father's Mate' with his 'old fashioned face' is reminiscent of Lawson's descriptions of himself as a child elsewhere. Another very early story, 'Malachi', in which the 'barmy' youth, butt of all, ennobles himself and confounds his persecutors by his sacrificial death, has some markedly autobiographical correspondences. 'The Third Murder', a tale about sleeping in a haunted house, in which the narrator thinks he must have imagined voices in the night, but then later discovers from a newspaper that a murder was being committed, seems with its heavy reliance on 'documentation' to be a variation on Poe, to whom Louisa had introduced the children. 'A Narrow Escape' is a parody of journals of exploration in the perilous hinterland. 'We Called Him "Ally" for Short', with its Twain-like description of the dog's 'chewing-up apparatus that an alligator might have envied', might well have reminded contemporaries of the Western frontier humorists' tall stories and vernacular humour (and Alligator in 'The Drover's Wife' has an even more Western 'chawing-up' apparatus).

<sup>9</sup> Lawson's comments on his early stories in 'From Mudgee Hills to London Town', *Complete Works*, II, pp.947–48.

While today, with hindsight, we would appreciate 'His Father's Mate' most for what it reveals about his first efforts, contemporaries were impressed by it. When J. F. Archibald brought out his selection from the *Bulletin's* first decade in 1890, *The Golden Shanty*, he included it together with 'A Song of the Republic'—a clear indication that the young Lawson was accepted immediately, even eagerly, as one who was making literature from Australian life, performing the miraculous synthesis that had been anticipated for so long.

Compared with his writing of a few years later, 'His Father's Mate' seems now to reveal the conflicts for Lawson between literary artifice and realistic observation. What is most 'Lawsonian' and memorable about it, is the terse, dramatised description of the preparations for Isley's funeral: the improvised shroud and coffin, the gin cases for the women to sit on in the 'hearse'. These coalesce into an image of the outward poverty but essential, inner humanity of these bush people, who are so much on the margin of civilisation that even their 'town' is put thus, in quotes, to suggest that it is not really a town at all, in the genteel reader's sense—merely the characters' necessary delusion that they still live within society.

These details, rather than the lavishly literary evocation of 'the predominant note of the scene' in the story's opening, provide the authenticating 'local colour'. This phrase from the criticism of the time, conveyed the imaginative presentation of details to capture a way of life that lay outside what traditionally had been shown in literature. The 'local colourists' of the American West had made the language and customs of new communities there the subject of a new and ostensibly anti-literary literature, and provided one potent model for the writer in colonial Australia.

For all the literariness in Lawson's first story, especially with the subject of the death of a child, the apparently objective itemisation of the funeral 'defamiliarises' the conventional, presenting the customs observed as bordering on the eccentric, even bizarre. The details which seem so real, so authentic are composed to imply some unspecified revelation or significance. This power of suggestion was to be at the heart of Lawson's mature work.

In 1890, unemployed in Sydney, Henry met Mary Cameron, a young schoolteacher from the country, whom later generations were to know as Dame Mary Gilmore. Sharing literary and political enthusiasms, they became close friends, though whether there was any romantic attraction between them remains uncertain. In some accounts, Louisa packed Henry off to Albany, W.A., because of his interest in Mary Cameron; in others, because he had tested his appeal to the opposite sex by proposing to one of his mother's boarders, and had been accepted. Whatever the reason, and seeking employment was no doubt a part of it, he went with his younger brother Peter, to find Western Australia economically depressed and offering no opportunities beyond the writing of some articles for the *Albany Observer*. He returned to find eastern Australia in the turmoil of the Maritime Strike. Early the next year, 1891, he certainly developed a romantic interest during a visit to Eurunderee where at the old family home he met another schoolteacher, Bridget Lambert, a niece of the tenant. His poem, 'A Free Selector's Daughter' followed, which, like the early stories 'The Third Murder' and (under a different title) 'We Called Him "Ally" for Short', he contributed to the Brisbane *Boomerang*. In March he was invited to join its staff. As opportunities for employment, which in Lawson's case had never been good, were worsening, he accepted—and took his first, and as it was to turn out, his only full-time writing job.

The *Boomerang* had been founded by William Lane, the socialist leader and publicist, who was now editing his own paper, *The Worker*, in Brisbane, and later would organise the establishment of New Australia, the Utopian community in Paraguay that Mary Cameron was to join. Lawson also wrote for the *Worker*, notably 'Freedom on the Wallaby' during the Shearers' Strike. But under *Boomerang* editor Gresley Lukin his regular job was to select snippets from the country newspapers and cast them into rhyme.

A. G. Stephens, who was to become editor of the *Bulletin's* literary 'Red Page', and Lawson's most demanding critic, was also on the staff of the *Boomerang* and remembered him as 'a tall, dark, wiry young man with large luminous brown eyes' who was responsible for the 'Country Crumbs' columns 'From nine to five daily Lawson was at the office, usually walking up and down the room allotted to him, making verse painfully and persistently. For months I listened to him pounding out his rhymes, often aloud, as he paced to and fro:



Four horses in the pound  
—Bound, crowned, drowned, sound—  
Four horses in the pound  
—Warwick pound, Warwick found—  
Two horses better drowned.<sup>10</sup>

As always, Lawson was prolific in verse during his time on the *Boomerang*, and his contributions to it, other than the ‘Country Crumbs’ columns, included not only militant songs like ‘As Ireland Wore the Green’, or the hectic ‘Triumph of the People’ (‘Lo, the gods of Vice and Mammon from their pinnacles are hurled’), but also the *fey, fin de siècle* ‘The Water-lily’ originally published in Louisa’s *Dawn*. Among contributions to the *Bulletin* that appeared while he was in Brisbane was ‘The Fire at Ross’s Farm’.

The worsening economic situation in Queensland during the period of the Shearers’ Strike led to Lawson and others being retrenched from the *Boomerang*. Returning to Sydney in 1892, he lived either in cheap boarding houses or, relations with Louisa having become strained, at the home of his Aunt Emma at Dawes Point, and freelanced for the *Bulletin*, the Catholic *Freeman’s Journal*, and John Norton’s *Truth* at the proverbial penny-a-line. From this time, following his removal from his mother’s direct influence and his experience of being a self-supporting man of letters in Brisbane, he began to become the bohemian writer, dossing in cheap lodging houses, such as 221½ Castlereagh Street for five shillings a week, when flush, or in the Domain when not, making a circle of literary and political acquaintances as his reputation brought him more confidence. One of Lawson’s favourite haunts was McNamara’s bookshop in Castlereagh Street, to which he would return whenever in Sydney and where he met enthusiasts for all radical causes, including Billy Hughes, W. A. Holman, and his future brother-in-law Jack Lang. After his return from Brisbane, Lawson also became friends with E. J. Brady, bush balladist and, editor of the *Australian Workman*, and ‘Banjo’ Paterson, with whom he cooked up a verse debate in the *Bulletin* over the ‘issue’ of the country versus the city to make some ready cash.

10 A. G. Stephens, ‘Henry Lawson’, an obituary in *Art in Australia*, November 1922, reprinted in Roderick, *Criticism*, pp.220–21.

While he was still only in his mid-twenties, he had been writing prolifically, chiefly in verse, for over five years. Imaginatively, however, his increasing artistic confidence and maturity were being expressed in his prose. 'A Day on a Selection', 'The Drover's Wife', 'The Bush Undertaker', stories which drew on his memories of past life in the country, and which still remain among the most highly regarded of his works, were written at this time. 'Stories' though is not perhaps the word with the most appropriate connotations for the context in which Lawson was then writing.

Thinking broadly of the publishing opportunities available to him, we could see him as having two opposed models for fiction. One was the conventionally 'literary' magazine story, heavily narrated and contrived to achieve a pointed resolution, whether melodramatic or humorous. Its opposite was the sketch, not ostensibly a fiction at all but a quick impression of a typical character, scene or incident, drawn from life 'photographically'—for critics were inclined to consider its effectiveness by comparison with the graphic arts. Lawson's prose began appearing in an age of realism and, in the English-speaking world particularly, one of controversy over this movement and its anti-romantic engagement with contemporary life. Maupassant, even Zola, Bret Harte and Mark Twain were among those Lawson was likened to by contemporaries when his major prose collections appeared. But, to locate the context in which his writing appeared, we need not go to Walter Besant, Edmund Gosse, W. D. Howells, Henry James, Robert Louis Stevenson and others engaged in debate over realism on both sides of the Atlantic around this time (a debate into which Lawson was enlisted by Edward Garnett in his 1902 *Academy and Literature* article). Nor need we consider the emergence of vernacular, 'anti-literary' realist literatures elsewhere, in places as remote as Russia or Italy. The same context of romance and realism was provided by the *Bulletin* and other magazines Lawson read and wrote for. Although the conventionally well-told, fully rounded story predominated in those A. G. Stephens selected for the *Bulletin Story Book* in 1900, the magazine was famous for its 'pars'—the brief realistic sketches and vernacular anecdotes that revealed the typical, albeit through the eccentric.

Sketches from 'low' life were long established in colonial

Australian journalism. Marcus Clarke and the 'Vagabond' (John Stanley James) were earlier examples from Melbourne, though their sketches of urban life affected a patronising attitude towards their subjects, a conscious rakishness that winked a reminder to the gentle reader that the writer was really one of them. As the *Bulletin* was in large part, through its 'pars', written by its readers, this literary smugness hardly obtained. The style was briskly and economically factual, something like this:

The scene is a small New South Wales Western selection, the holder whereof is native-English. His wife is native-Irish. Time Sunday, about 8 a.m.

(‘A Day on a Selection’, *Bulletin* 1892; I, p.224)

Bush all round—bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No range in the distance. The bush consists of stunted rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization—a shanty on the main road.

(‘The Drover’s Wife’, *Bulletin* 1892; I, p.238)

In its ‘stylelessness’ this is anti-literary realism that aligns itself with the terse, factual ‘par’ rather than with the displays of fine literary writing we find in the opening of the conventional story of the day, or in ‘His Father’s Mate’. Instead of ‘literary’ description, the feeling is more of stage directions (and Lawson felt that the theatre had been an important stimulus to his writing).<sup>11</sup> However, in both these pieces the ‘literary’ is also there to contrast ironically with the sketched reality: with references to the works of Edward Bellamy, Henry George and Ignatius Donnelly in ‘A Day on a Selection’ and to the *Ladies’ Journal* in ‘The Drover’s Wife’. One way, as here, of establishing one’s credentials as a realist rather than a romancer was to disparage

11 ‘Family History of the Lawsons’, manuscript by Gertrude O’Connor (née Lawson), ML A1898, includes an unpublished holograph note by Henry which states, ‘First idea of writing at the age of 12 or 13, came from the theatre probably’. Elsewhere, he frequently recalls his youthful fondness for the theatre.

literature as fanciful and artificial, to heighten the illusion that *this* by comparison was real, as Twain had done in *Huckleberry Finn* (and Lawson claimed to have read all of Twain).

In these early but fully-achieved sketch stories, Lawson can be seen drawing on his memories of selection life (which he would have shared with thousands of his readers), on stories that Louisa and others had told, and on remembered local characters, such as his grandfather for 'The Bush Undertaker'. The manner of the paragraph sketch which records such lore is extended towards the length of a story, though without the conventional contrivances of the plot.

With 'The Drover's Wife', within the dramatic framework of the killing of the snake, Lawson presents an archetypal figure who suffers fire, flood and drought through a succession of sketches written in the past tense. But the realistic details, such as the finger poked through the corner of the handkerchief, make her individually, and revealingly, 'typical' in the manner of the observant 'par', as well as familiarly representative. Although these early pieces are heavily narrated, and Lawson's development was to be in the direction of fuller dramatic presentation, they have that apparent 'artlessness' which contemporary commentators appreciated. 'The Drover's Wife' does not seem like 'literature', something made up, worked over, but the 'real' thing (so subliminal are the Biblical associations of the snake and the plagues inflicted on this mythic mother).

In comparison 'The Bush Undertaker'—which presents a weird individual and a macabre train of events to typify, rather than represent, how the bush acts as 'the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds'—is more conventionally a story in its development and more formal narrative manner. And if 'A Day on a Selection' is more a sketch than 'The Drover's Wife', and that less formally a story than 'The Bush Undertaker', this suggests how Lawson was perceiving two opposed models for fiction and experimenting with blending them in varying combinations.

Looking back in later life to this time when he was a new contributor to the *Bulletin*, and to the editor's preferences, Lawson wrote that:

Archibald in those days, preferred the short story to the short sketch. I thought the short story was a lazy man's game, second to 'free' verse, compared with the sketch. The sketch, to be really

good, must be good in every line. But the sketch story is best of all.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time that Lawson was experimenting with the apparently opposed forms of the realistic sketch and the literary story—to shape his memories of country life into fictions that would ring true to his experience—he was also writing about life in the city. While there was a set of local conventions for presenting bush life (some of which, as an anti-literary realist he was to enumerate in ‘The Union Buries Its Dead’), the city was a challenge to the writer’s imagination. Its ‘types’ had not been established as had those of the bush, with the squatters and selectors, sundowners and New Chum jackaroos, the drovers and bush heroines of fiction and the stage. Even for contemporaries, there was the apparent paradox that local writing seemed to be preoccupied with the life of the countryside, when by this time, the early 1890s, Australia was among the most urbanised of nations.

In the early ‘Arvie Aspinall’ sequence of stories about apprentices at ‘Grinder Brothers’, Lawson drew on his own experiences of a few years before as a carriage hand at Hudson Brothers to express his sympathy with the new class of young urban manual workers—or ‘larrikins’ as they appeared to the middle-class press. These stories (which began appearing in the *Bulletin* in 1892, before ‘The Drover’s Wife’) are generally, and rightly, held to be sentimental, showing the worst of Dickens’s influence on Lawson. (And their Dickensian notes seem to be reinforced by the larrikins’ dialogue, which looks like an imitation of how ‘low-life’ characters ‘spoke’ in English fiction; though perhaps this should be seen as Lawson’s realism asserting itself, for in his autobiography he recalls that most of the apprentices at Hudson Brothers were from Birmingham and the North Country.) But succeeding pieces set in the city capture the typical through apparently quick and detached sketches from life, frequently of lonely men in boarding houses.

While, outwardly, Lawson’s life continued the pattern of moves away

12 ‘Three or Four Archibalds and the Writer’ (MS. 1919), *Complete Works*, II, p.987.

from Sydney in search of employment and returns to freelance journalism and, increasingly, bohemian company, an imaginative development was rapidly taking place. A decisive stimulus and source of experience, for him as a writer—like his earlier years in the country and then his marriage—was the journey he took to Bourke, 'the metropolis of the Great Scrubs' in north-western New South Wales near the Queensland border, from September 1892 to June 1893. He arrived during the worst drought ever recorded, and, although Lawson had affected scorn at Paterson's romantic idealisations of the bush during their verse 'debate', he was unprepared for what he found 'right up country'. As he wrote to his Aunt Emma from Hungerford on the Queensland border in January: 'Once in Bourke I'll find the means of getting back to Sydney—never to face the bush again ... You can have no idea of the horrors of the country out here. Men tramp and beg and live like dogs'.<sup>13</sup>

In Bourke he stayed at the Carriers' Arms hotel, 'Watty's', where he met many of the models for his characters, like the Oracle and the Giraffe, in the stories that were to follow over a decade. The immediate imaginative outcome, however, was some of his most memorable sketches: 'In a Dry Season' (the journey up), the Twain-like 'Darling River', 'Hungerford', 'In a Wet Season' (the journey back) and the contrast between city and bush in 'Dossing Out and Camping'. These read as straight sketches, reportage, though imaginative reportage full of suggestive detail.

The early Mitchell pieces—'Enter Mitchell', 'Mitchell a Character Sketch', 'On the Edge of the Plain'—are sketch stories, vernacular vignettes that present the typical with dramatic directness, and without a sense of the author as a genteel intermediary presenting us with a representative instance of 'low' life. The often delicate distinction between fictions such as these, with their origins in the *Bulletin* 'par' (as some first appeared), and more conventionally shaped stories can be seen from the two versions of "Rats", which was first published in the *Bulletin* in 1893. When Lawson included this in his first collection, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, he added a concluding paragraph which turned the sketch of meeting an old hatter fighting with his swag and fishing in the dust, into the story of how the hatter had been taking in,

13 Letter to Emma Brooks (1903) in Colin Roderick, ed., *Henry Lawson: Letters 1890–1922* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973), p.53; reprinted in Brian Kiernan, *Henry Lawson*, Portable Australian Authors (University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1976), p.120.

and taking down, his audience. This ending makes it another of the many stories about practical jokes and confidence tricks that Lawson was writing around this time and later. In his form it loses the disturbing implications—that the latter is in some unstated way revealingly typical of existence in the bush—which were regained when the final paragraph was dropped for *While the Billy Boils*.

For an editor, this story poses the problems of whether Lawson's apparent preference for the version with the twist at the end should be respected. To a critic, the two versions can suggest an artistic uncertainty and opposed resolutions of it: whether to turn a story neatly, with an ironic twist to its ending, and limit its possible significance for readers, or to leave it 'unfinished', as more a sketch than a well-made story, to reverberate in the reader's mind.

One of the great early stories and a crucial one in marking the development of his characteristically dramatic method and colloquial manner, is 'The Union Buries Its Dead'. Significantly subtitled 'A Sketch from Life' when it first appeared as 'A Bushman's Funeral' in *Truth* in 1893, while Lawson was still 'up country', this is a sketch story, with the sharp observations of the sketch extended to fill the whole frame of the action, yet with its significance left implicit, and indefinite. The narrator's voice is flat, yarning, laconic. The details he provides and his own observations contribute—most often with terse directness, though at times with seeming digressiveness—to the story's enigmatic 'point': his attitude towards life and death.

Through him, we see men on the margin of existence, so much so that their values are definable only by contrast with the absolute negative of death. 'It didn't matter much, nothing does' is, ostensibly, the nihilistic attitude that pervades this story. This might remind us of the Bush Undertaker ('it's all over now; nothing matters now—nothin' didn't ever matter, nor, nor don't') and of what might have been the ending point of his story, not an apprehension of transcendent mysteries but a return to mundane and meaningless existence: 'He sat down on a log near by and passed his hand wearily over his forehead—but only as one who was tired and felt the heat ...' (I, p.248). As in this earlier story, the emphasis in 'The Union Buries Its Dead' falls on the grim comedy of life rather than on the possible consolations of death.

Approached as an imaginative expression of Lawson's encounter with the realities of mateship and unionism in the heartland, 'The Union

Buries Its Dead' might seem sardonically disillusioned. 'Trades unionism is a new and grand religion', Lawson had written in the *Albany Observer* in 1890.<sup>14</sup> For the narrator here, 'unionism is stronger than creed' but 'drink, however, is stronger than unionism'. The bushman who looks like a drover just returned from a big trip, and could be Paterson's Clancy, is easily inveigled into the hotel. Life goes on—but what distinguishes these men from the dogs (like which, in Lawson's letter to his aunt, they live and die) is their ritual acknowledgement of their common fate. In this funeral, the universal traditional pieties attached to death are 'defamiliarised' and seen—like the Bush Undertaker's burial of Brummy, or even the Sunday promenade of the Drover's Wife—as defences against absolute nullity, as the final vestiges of civilised humanity that these characters cling to for their salvation in this world.

The story is not only a register of Lawson's view of how the fraternal ideals of unionism were realised in Bourke while he was there. Its language is both specific and general, so that it can also imply the universal function of rituals through which mortals face together their own ultimately lonely and absurd fates.

The title by which we now know the story arouses expectations of solemn public piety, the mourning of a hero. The details, particularly the fact that the deceased is unknown, make this ironic. Yet what transpires lends some precarious sense of dignity and meaning to the lives of those who attend the ritual. Just before the end, the narrator steps out of the fictional frame to allude to local literary conventions that he assumes his readers would expect a story, as distinct from 'a sketch from life', to observe. His references to the absences of wattle, a tearful mate, and 'the sad Australian sunset' proclaim him to be an anti-literary realist; and this paragraph, which might seem excrescent, is part of the whole defamiliarising process the story follows in departing from literary as well as social stereotypes and expectations.

14 'The New Religion', *Albany Observer*, July 5 1890, in *Complete Works*, I, p.112. This was part of a series of articles headed 'Straight Talk' which appeared under the name of 'Joe Swallow', a pseudonym Lawson frequently used around this time, for verse as well as prose. 'Jack Cornstalk', also the name of a character, was another pseudonym he favoured.



In June 1893, Lawson returned to Sydney, 'never to face the bush again', as he had vowed in the letter to his Aunt Emma, but clearly, from the writing that followed, his imagination was filled with memories of the Great Scrubs and the men he had met up country. He renewed contact with the radical and political figures who gathered at McNamara's bookshop, and had hopes of being appointed editor of the Sydney *Worker*. When these were disappointed he crossed to New Zealand in November (his letter to Emma Brooks from Hungerford had mentioned the offer of the editorship of a New Zealand paper). New Zealand was then regarded as one of the Australasian colonies, a prospective member of the proposed federation: 'I think the most pleasant days of my life were spent on an old telegraph line in New Zealand. Am inclined to prefer New Zealand of all the colonies', he wrote in an autobiographical note bound into Gertrude's 'The Lawson Family' manuscript in the Mitchell Library.

He arrived penniless in Wellington and was preparing to 'doss out' in the park when Tom Mills, then foreman compositor of the *New Zealand Times* sought him out and offered hospitality. This story, which Mills told in *Henry Lawson by His Mates* suggests (like all those other stories of the local press greeting Lawson and carrying him off to fete him wherever he berthed) the appeal his writing had for his generation all over Australasia. Mills knew Lawson only by his writings, but had already been lecturing on these to sympathetic gatherings. The days on the telegraph line, which Lawson remembered happily, were spent as a member of the gang laying a cable between Picton and Dunedin. 'Stiffner and Jim', 'His Country After All' and the 'Steelman' stories have their origins in his experiences during this time.

Late in July 1894 he returned to Sydney, expecting to take up a position on the *Daily Worker*, only to find it was on the point of folding. Once again he was disappointed in his hopes of finding regular, congenial employment as a writer, and returned to casual penny-a-line journalism for the weekly *Worker* and other papers, staying with his Aunt Emma or in cheap lodgings, still a Castlereagh and Pitt Street hack, a *lumpen-littérateur*.

Even so, this was a productive period. He continued to produce verse and fiction, as well as articles, prolifically; and he was reappraising his attitudes. His time on the *Boomerang* in Brisbane had set him free from his mother and her causes, and the Shearers' Strike had forced him to

consider the distance, even conflict, between the ideals he had held abstractly and the realities he encountered, as also had the times spent around Bourke in the heartland of the Australian legend.

In *Henry Lawson by His Mates*, John Le Gay Brereton remembers first meeting the poet he admired so much at Mary Cameron's in 1895: 'You can take it from me, Jack, the Australian, workman is a brute' were Lawson's first words when they left together. In the pieces he contributed to the *Worker* he deunbunked the bush legend. Immediately after his return from Bourke he wrote:

The average Australian bushman is too selfish, narrow-minded, and fond of booze to liberate his country. The average shearer thinks that he is the only wronged individual, and that the squatter is the only tyrant on the face of the earth. Also, the shearer is often a god-almighty in his own estimation; and it would be good for him to know that Australia might worry along if there wasn't a sheep in all the land.

(‘Our Countrymen’, *Worker*, 1893; I, pp.308–09)

He criticised the shearers for claiming a monopoly of wrongs, and for asserting these selfishly and divisively against the interests of workers throughout the whole economy:

Get rid of the idea that the shearers are the only wronged men on earth and the squatters are the only tyrants. Remember that the hardship of bush life at its worst is not a circumstance compared with what thousands of poor women in cities have to go through. Remember that there are bitterer struggles and grander battles fought by the poor of cities than ever in the country.

(‘A Word in Season’, *Worker*, 1894; I, p.400)

At the same time, Lawson was a critical observer of ‘mateship’:

The egoistic 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. The one was altogether too glorious, and the other too angelic to

exist amongst mortals.

(‘The Cant and Dirt of Labour Literature’, *Worker*, 1894; I, p.399)

Here the ‘New Australian’ imagination refers specifically to William Lane’s campaign to establish his socialist community, his ideal Australia, in Paraguay. But, more generally, Lawson was critical of ‘mateship’ in practice as both the traducing of a humanitarian ideal to sectional class interests, and as a creed more honoured in the breach than in the observance among its presumed adherents. The stories that followed his trip to Bourke do not unambiguously celebrate a ‘collectivist, egalitarian’ ethos any more than do these journalistic comments just quoted.<sup>15</sup>

‘Baldy Thompson: A Sketch of A Squatter’, based on the station owner who helped Lawson and his mate get back to Bourke, appeared in the same issue of the *Worker* as ‘The Cant and Dirt of Labour Literature’. It revealed ‘mateship’ operating across the rural class divisions and aroused considerable indignation because of this. By contrast, a number of sketches and stories about the ‘nomadic tribe’ of bush workers elaborate the situation in ‘A Typical Bush Yarn’, which first appeared as a *Bulletin* ‘par’ in 1893:

They were two chaps named Gory and Blanky. They were tramping from Nevermineware to Smotherplace. Gory was a bad egg, and Blanky knew it; but they’d fallen in with each other on the track and agreed to travel together for the sake of company. Blanky had £25, which fact was known to Gory, who was stumped.

Every night Gory tried to get the money, which fact was known to Blanky, who never slept with more than one eye shut. When their tracks divided, Gory said to Blanky:

‘Look a-here! Where the deuce do you keep that stuff of yours? I’ve been tryin’ to get holt on it every night when you was asleep’.

15 Russel Ward, comparing the Australian and American ‘frontiersmen’ writes of ‘our collectivist, egalitarian bias’ in *The Australian Legend* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1958), p.258. [For a different reading see Michael Wilding, ‘Henry Lawson’s Socialist Vision’ in *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction* (Sydney Studies 16, Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture, Sydney, 1998), pp.32–75.]

'I know you have,' said Blanky.

'Well, where the blazes did you put it?'

'Under your head!'

'The —, you did!'

They grinned, shook hands, and parted; and Gory scratched his head very hard and very often as he tramped along the track.<sup>16</sup>

The variations on the relationship between these mates, Brummy and Swampy as they became in later versions, can be seen as Lawson's critical appraisal of 'mateship' in practice. It is reflected in his work immediately after the Bourke experience with an unillusioned, sometimes sardonic realism. There is no idealisation of the bush as a moral alternative to the city. Also in the *Bulletin* in 1893 was his enumeration of 'Some Popular Australian Mistakes' which concluded: 'We wish to Heaven that Australian writers would leave off trying to make a paradise out of the Out Back Hell ... What's the good of making a heaven of a hell when by describing it as it really is we might do some good for the poor lost souls there?' (I, p.275).

Some years later he described his typical bushmen as themselves the victims of blinding 'literary' preconceptions about the Out Back:

Bill and Jim do not see the bush as it is; and if they write verses about it—as they frequently do in camp—they put in shining rivers and grassy plains, and western hills, and dawn and morn and eve and gloaming; and forest boles of gigantic size—everything, in fact, which is not and never was in bush scenery or language; and the more the drought bakes them the more inspired they seem to become. Perhaps they unconsciously see the bush as it should be, and their literature is the result of craving for the ideal.

(*'The Bush and the Ideal'*, *Bulletin*, 1897; I, p.522)

At the end of 1894, just before Christmas, Louisa brought out Lawson's first book, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, on her *Dawn* press. Although it contained some of his finest early stories, including 'The Drover's

16 Lawson reworked this anecdote in 1894 and incorporated it within 'Two Sundowners', *Complete Works*, I, pp.394–95.

Wife' and 'The Bush Undertaker', it was poorly printed and produced. In his preface, its author expressed his glumness when he first saw it:

This pamphlet—I can scarcely call it a volume—contains some of my earliest efforts, and they are sufficiently crude and faulty. They have been collected and printed hurriedly, with an eye to Christmas, and without experienced editorial assistance, which last, I begin to think, was sadly necessary. (I, p.427)

But he put up a brave front by opening with the assertion that:

This is an attempt to publish, in Australia, a collection of sketches and stories at a time when everything Australian, in the shape of a book, must bear the imprint of a London publishing firm, before our critics will condescend to notice it, and before the 'reading public' will think it worth its while to buy nearly so many copies as will pay for the cost of presenting a suitable volume. (I, p.426)

Today, when the 'literary nationalism' of the past is often deplored, we need to remember the economic realities of the colonial literary culture, which Lawson knew so well by this time. Although there was a flourishing periodical press, Lawson who wrote prolifically for newspapers and magazines could not live by his writing in Sydney and was forced to seek painting and labouring jobs elsewhere. Book publication, which promised the chance of financial independence and a wider reputation, was still dominated by London and Edinburgh. But in 1895 Brereton introduced Lawson to George Robertson who had accepted the 'Banjo's' *The Man from Snowy River*, and Robertson agreed to publish a volume of verse and another of prose. Both appeared the following year: *In the Days When the World was Wide* and *While the Billy Boils*.

Much of what today we would think of as the essential Lawson appeared in *While the Billy Boils*. Essential not only because the collection as a whole displays those nationally 'representative' characteristics that A. G. Stephens was concerned with (as were many others after him), but also because it contained a good proportion of his best-known pieces: 'The Bush Undertaker', 'The Drover's Wife', "'Rats'", 'The Union Buries Its Dead', the early Mitchell sketches and Steelman stories, the travel sketches based on the trip to Bourke.

Although the four 'Joe Wilson' stories and at least 'The Loaded Dog' would need to be added, a short-list of the most popular and critically favoured pieces of Lawson's prose could almost be drawn from this volume alone. The fact that it collects pieces written before he was thirty suggests that his writing did not develop. This is true of his verse. The poems most fondly remembered today were amongst his earliest and were collected in *In the Days When the World Was Wide*. Nevertheless, a pattern of development, in technique if not always in quality, is discernible in, or behind, the fifty-two pieces that make up the prose collection; and it is a pattern that was to continue.

This pattern is most elusive in *While the Billy Boils* because the arrangement is not chronological. For example, 'His Father's Mate', his first story, appears half-way through the volume. Establishing the date of composition for other pieces is rarely so straight-forward: even though most had been published previously in periodicals, the dates of their appearances did not necessarily approximate to the dates of composition. Editors would hold contributions over for special issues, particularly their Christmas numbers, so that this, like Lawson's later prose collections, does not directly record his artistic development nor, fully, realise his intentions in composing a volume.

Stung by A. G. Stephens's criticism of the lack of organisation in *While the Billy Boils*, Lawson defended himself by saying there were pieces he wanted to include but the *Bulletin* would not release them. Later commentators, reacting quite properly against Stephens's conventional demands for 'a single plotted, climaxed story'<sup>17</sup> have emphasised the originality and modernity of Lawson's narrative discontinuities and have perceived underlying thematic relationships. While it is true, as they have argued, that the characters, events and settings that Lawson drew from his experience were unified in his imagination, this is not particularly observable with *While the Billy Boils*. (Logically, such an assertion, perhaps a truism with any writer, works against claims for the particular unity of a specific collection, because the assertion is ultimately directed beyond it, to the writer's complete corpus.) Although Stephens was unsympathetic to Lawson's imaginativeness, he was right in discerning the generic and qualitative

17 A. G. Stephens, 'Lawson's Prose', *Bulletin*, 29 August 1896, in Roderick, *Criticism*, p.51.

differences within this collection: some pieces *are* better than others and of a different imaginative order, even though we may not agree with Stephens's examples.

*While The Billy Boils* shows Lawson developing different techniques, working simultaneously in a number of genres (which is why 'development' becomes a difficult term after his earliest stories and sketches), sometimes observing, sometimes confusing expectations of what 'fiction' and 'journalism' should separately be. It shows him writing freely across a range of possibilities for imaginative prose and revealing opposed tendencies: towards melodrama, sentimentality, and moralising on the one hand, and on the other towards an austere realism that can generate symbolic suggestions of the absurd and the tragic, the ambiguously disturbing rather than the consolingly resolved. These extremes can be found in *While the Billy Boils* because it contains, for example, the early (and awful) 'When the Sun Went Down' as well as the unsentimentalised early stories that remain among his finest. This manifest variety in genre and quality is more revealing about Lawson as a writer in a specific literary culture and market than the postulated ultimate unity of all his work.

The collection displays a wide range of possibilities for imaginative prose and fiction, from the ostensibly factual Bourke sketches, through sketch stories like 'Going Blind', to a conventionally structured magazine story like 'The Geological Spieler'. To identify this as a magazine story is not to disparage it. Like 'The Iron Bark Chip' and 'The Loaded Dog' it is a good magazine story, with some morally unconventional or worrying overtones left to reverberate. Rather, it is to emphasise its distance from the sketch, and so the variety in the pieces Lawson was writing around the same time. This variety reflects the literary culture and the models he was responding to, as a freelance trying to live by his writing. Perhaps, if his markets and models had been different, he might have produced more of the open-ended sketch stories that modern critics prefer. But perhaps not. Late in his life, recalling Archibald as editor of the *Bulletin*, Lawson wrote that he had difficulty in persuading him 'to let me leave tragedy (as in 'His Father's Mate' or 'The Drover's Wife') for (alleged) humour'.<sup>18</sup>

The opposed tendencies within Lawson's writing from its beginnings

18 'Three or Four Archibalds and the Writer', *Complete Works*, II, p.987.

are symptomatic not only of his artistic personality but also of his circumstances as a penurious professional trying to judge advantageously the literary market in which he was working. Only by a ruthless selection from his prolific and varied journalism in the 1890s can we perceive him as a Chekhov, Joyce or Hemingway, an artistic purist. He could be that—as his close and continual revisions reveal. But he was also living from day to day by penny-a-line journalism and at the same time exploring how he could extend those apparently casual and 'authentic' sketches from life into the greater length and dramatic complexity of the magazine story—which paid more.

One of the last written and artistically mature of the stories in *While the Billy Boils* is 'Going Blind', which appeared in the *Worker* in 1895. It suggests the technical and imaginative developments that were taking place together within Lawson's fiction at this time, and within the outward confusion of his life. In 'Going Blind', the narrator, down on his luck, is boarding in the Full-and-Plenty Dining Rooms in Sydney. There he sympathetically befriends an older man who has come down from the country to seek treatment for his failing eyesight. They talk about the bush they both come from and about the old days. As the bushman's condition worsens, and it seems he has nowhere to return to nor any means of supporting himself in the city, the narrator attempts to help him, only to realise his own precarious situation. Then the bushman's brother, a drover, turns up unexpectedly to take him back up country.

From the narrator's nonchalant manner we might presume that this is an anecdotal sketch: that Lawson is writing up an encounter he has recently had in a boarding house on that 'urban frontier' between threadbare respectability and hopeless penury that he knew so intimately in these years. We have the same sense that he is writing up, as distinct from making up in 'Board and Residence' (also in *While the Billy Boils*) which is clearly an autobiographical sketch about city boarding house life; and in 'Mr Smellingscheck', which appeared in the *Bulletin* in 1897, and gives the impression of being a character sketch based on an actual encounter. But while 'Going Blind' has in its narrative manner and details the same sense of 'authenticity' as these sketches, it is clearly a *story* in the fullness of its dramatic development and its manipulation of the narrator's point of view, so that he becomes an observed, not merely an observing, character who extends the implications of the story to a complex extent.



The note of 'authenticity' in the presentation of the Full-and-Plenty Dining Rooms, the image of contemporary urban reality against which the memories and ideal of country life are to be tested, is achieved by literary means. There are the rhetorical repetitions in 'greasy little table', 'greasy little corner', 'greasy little dining room', 'greasy little kitchen'; the personalising of the impersonal with the 'roast beef one' or 'corn beef and cabbage one', and the comic grotesquerie of the waiter seen as a living skeleton in miniature.

These elements, which seem to be contrasting the realistic setting against which memories of the bush as an ideal alternative can be contrasted, are heavily literary. In a word they are 'Dickensian', amusing the reader and distancing him from the 'low' life which they present in all its quaintness. But they are not drawing on the Dickens model for conventional sentiment, as the earlier Arvie Aspinall stories were. Here they are employed dramatically by Lawson, on behalf of the narrator, who provides the setting in a jocularly depreciatory, embarrassed way, as though to suggest that if you looked on the funny side, if you could see their 'bohemian' character, the Full-and-Plenty Dining Rooms were really colourful. He poses, that is, as an amused, detached but knowing observer of the seamier side of life. Then he meets the bushman who has come from one of the old Selection Districts, like Lawson himself, and from the past:

We talked about grubbing and fencing and digging and droving and shearing—all about the bush—and it all came back to me as we talked. 'I can see it all now', he said once, in an abstracted tone, seeming to fix his helpless eyes on the wall opposite. But he didn't see the dirty blind wall, nor the dingy window, nor the skimpy little bed, nor the greasy wash-stand: he saw the dark blue ridges in the sunlight, the grassy sidings and flats, the creek with the clumps of she-oak here and there, the course of the willow-fringed river below, the distant peaks and ranges fading away into a lighter azure, the granite ridge in the middle distance, and the rocky rises, the stringy-bark and the apple-tree flats, the scrubs, and the sunlit plains—and all I could see it, too—plainer than ever I did. (I, p.455)

Of course, the man who is going blind cannot 'see it all'. His vision is

formed by homesickness and nostalgia for the past of his youth. It is the narrator who does the seeing for him—as he does more literally elsewhere in the story—but the narrator too 'sees' the vision plainer than ever he did. But what reality has this vision compared with the dirty, dingy, greasy reality in which they actually are? It also is a literary description—a cadenced, composed, romantic landscape with echoes of the 'Banjo's' 'sunlit plains extended'.

Instead of a simple disjunction between a literary ideal of the bush and contemporary urban reality, we have the literary versions of both thrown into question. The vision of the old life of the country is that of memory and imagination; and the jauntiness of the narrator's opening sketch of the Full-and-Plenty Dining Rooms is quickly undercut. The man who is going blind runs out of money, he is forced out of his room, and hopes to survive as 'a street musician', that is, a beggar.

This development and his desire to assist, force the narrator to a realisation of his own marginal position in society. The opening description of the Full-and-Plenty Dining Rooms, we now realise, was sentimentalised by the narrator remembering when he was 'a respectable single man'—which has ambiguous implications for what he is at the time of telling this story. The appearance of Jack Gunther's brother, who arrives unexpectedly to take him back to the world within those dark blue ridges, threatens a clumsy resolution. It could provide a dramatic confirmation that the moral alternative to the city is there to return to in fact, not only in memory and imagination.

But the story does not fall into sentimentality. The focus on the brother's protectiveness towards Jack puts the emphasis on the present, and the uncertain future, rather than on the past. The quiet closing line, 'I felt their grips on my hand for five minutes after we parted', leaves the story open, and the narrator alone in the now unfriendly environment Jack has been rescued from, with only the memory of the contact he had established with the brothers, and no suggestion that he will have anyone else to turn to, to assist him in maintaining his amusement with 'low' city life.

'Going Blind' is a story which brings together many of Lawson's preoccupations: 'Sydney or the Bush'; 'mateship' or the brotherhood of those enduring together the adversity of life; the temptation to engage in nostalgic reverie for a lost, simpler past, which, like the temptation to escape into drink that comes into the end of the story, Lawson knew

so well himself. These cultural and personal preoccupations are brought together delicately yet, for all the story's casually colloquial manner of narration, in a fully dramatised way that opens up implications rather than enforces a point. These implications are that our purchases on 'reality' are as uncertain as our fortunes—or our health. 'Reality' is an image we form subjectively and imaginatively to invest life with some meaning. The contemporary cultural contraries, Sydney or the Bush, become subsumed under a wider set of dramatically reconciled contraries—the real and the ideal, the 'actual' and the 'literary'. While it is necessary to attempt to apprehend the world as it is, without succumbing to drink, delusion or despair, one needs also to retain those ideals and imaginative qualities which can sustain one in adversity and sympathetic rapport with others.

We cannot say that Lawson 'sees' the idealised image of the Bush which the narrator of the story does, but we could say that Lawson implies some ideal is necessary in a reality that would otherwise be unendurably bleak. It is then, to use A. A. Phillips's important distinction, an 'unashamedly sentimental' story in being a moving account of the sympathetic but momentary contact between transients, but through its wealth of implication, its thematic complexity, it avoids 'sentimentality', the neat, simple resolution.<sup>19</sup>

In 1896, the same year as *While the Billy Boils* and *In the Days When the World Was Wide* appeared, Lawson married Bertha Bredt, a nineteen-year-old trainee nurse from Melbourne. He had met her the previous year when she visited Sydney to see her mother, who had married W. H. T. McNamara, the proprietor of the Castlereagh Street bookshop. Lawson cut short a second visit to New Zealand to court Bertha.

With the favourable reception of two books and marriage in the same year, Lawson might have seemed to have established himself securely and at last to be starting on a stable career. Financially this was not to be so, for while he continued to write prolifically, his income remained uncertain, and all the more inadequate now he was married. In fact, he had to borrow ten pounds to marry and soon after the newlyweds left

19 A. A. Phillips, 'The Craftsmanship of Lawson', *Meanjin* 2 (1948); *The Australian Tradition* (Cheshire, Melbourne, 1958), p.12.

for Perth in search of employment during the boom there—only to find that they had to live in a tent while Henry returned to his old trade of house-painting. It is possible that Bertha wanted to take her husband out of Sydney, away from his drinking companions, for the once shy, awkward bush lad now regularly found conviviality and confidence through drink.

From the beginning of the marriage, there was conflict between the bohemian city habits that Henry had formed, at least since his return from Bourke, and the domesticity that Bertha could reasonably have expected marriage to bring. Like all Lawson's past and future attempts to resolve his difficulties by going elsewhere, their stay in Western Australia was short-lived. After their return, Bertha's concern may have been increased by talk of her husband's interest in Hannah Thornburn, a young woman who modelled occasionally for one of his artist friends. While the nature of the relationship between Henry and Hannah is uncertain, she later grew in his imagination into a romanticised, compensating figure: one who, like his dead sister Nettie, became the focus for his wistful, wounded broodings over what might have been. In any case, Bertha was anxious to remove him from the company he was keeping in Sydney and persuaded him to look again for work in New Zealand.

They arrived in Wellington in April 1897 with a reference from Archibald that, with Lawson's reputation as a writer and the co-operation of politicians and officials, secured him a post as the teacher of a Maori school at Mangamaunu. The best part of six months was spent here, in what at first appealed as idyllic isolation, but which soon became a wearisome and stressful confinement. Bertha provides the chief sources on this period, through her contribution to *Henry Lawson by His Mates*, and the later *My Henry Lawson* 'ghosted' by her de facto Will Lawson (who was no relation). But she has been shown to have been inaccurate about many of the details she recalled, more than thirty and forty years later (especially details relating to the Joe Wilson stories), and unrevealing about this testing time in their marriage.

The Lawsons' stay at Mangamaunu has been closely reconstructed by W. H. Pearson in his *Henry Lawson Among Maoris* (1968). He argues from the literary evidence that the experience, which was intended to result in freshly inspired writing, induced instead an 'artistic crisis' when Lawson, confronted by cultural values he could not sympathise

with, withdrew to 'a recognition of the limitations in time and place in which his talents could operate'.<sup>20</sup> This crisis anticipated what was to happen in London, and later in Sydney, following his return to a very different Australia from the one he had come to artistic consciousness in.

Bertha's pregnancy provided the excuse to return to Wellington from Mangamaunu in October 1897. It was there that Bland Hold commissioned a playscript, 'Pinter's Son Jim', which ended up as the story (rather than the announced novel), 'The Hero of Redclay'. From Wellington Lawson wrote a letter to his old friend 'Jack' Le Gay Brereton, suggesting that he was feeling some conflict in adjusting to the responsibilities of marriage after the careless days of 'knocking around' with his mates. A similar sentiment is expressed in the poem 'Written Afterwards', dedicated to Brereton, which appeared in the *Bulletin* early in 1898. In February that year, his son 'Jim' was born and the family returned to Sydney the following month.

Again, as in New Zealand, a tradition of state patronage assisted the writer of growing reputation, and family, but without any steady means of support. A sinecure was found for him in the Government Statistician's Office. Lawson, however, was cavalier about the minimal obligations of signing on and off entailed (perhaps because he found them demeaning) and it was revoked. Archibald, the most generous of editors, responded to constant requests for advances and loans, and George Robertson, the most generous of publishers, protected Lawson against his willingness to dispose of his copyright. But still colonial Australian society could not provide a writer it esteemed with a market he could live by. In New Zealand, Lawson had decided that his best hope of making a career from writing full-time lay in London. He had been encouraged by interested enquiries from Blackwood, Chambers and Methuen. He began preparing stories with which to break into the metropolitan market, and wrote to Angus and Robertson that he did not intend to 'sacrifice any more *prose* work in Australia'.

Back in Sydney again, however, he found himself among the old difficulties, and old friends. These were the years celebrated in George Taylor's *Those Were the Days*, Arthur Jose's *The Romantic Nineties*

20 W. H. Pearson, *Henry Lawson Among Maoris* (Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968), p.155.

and Randolph Bedford's *Naught to Thirty-Three*, of Sydney bohemia and the Dawn and Dusk Club—though from these accounts by contemporaries, 'bohemia' seems to have meant mainly beer, some cheap red wine with food, lots of talk and then home to the family by the last ferry or tram. For Lawson, with his low tolerance of alcohol, such distractions were injurious.

Towards the end of 1898, he entered a home for inebriates, and then began a more stable period while he revised *In the Days When the World Was Wide* for a new edition, to appear in 1900; put together a new collection of verse and another of prose for Angus and Robertson; and worked on material he was intending to try on the London market. When the new collections, *Verses Popular and Humorous*, *On The Track* and *Over the Sliprails* appeared in 1900, Lawson was finally on his way to London, having been obliged, as he wrote to Earl Beauchamp requesting assistance, to 'sacrifice two more books in Australia'.<sup>21</sup>

Like *While the Billy Boils* (and the prose collections that were to follow), *On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails* provide no clear guide to developments in Lawson's writing, as they include pieces written before his previous collection, such as 'The Darling River' and the Steelman stories inspired by his first visit to New Zealand. Their inclusion contributes heavily to the sense of formal variety in the two volumes (which were also combined in the same year). While the pieces known to have been written later show variety across a range of modes and moods ('The Iron Bark Chip', 'They Wait on the Wharf in Black', 'No Place for a Woman', 'The Hero of Redclay') they have, when considered together, the common characteristic of further extending the sketch or sketch story towards the length and shape of the magazine story. They are more fully rounded off, with amplification of settings and characters. They continue the process, discernible among the later stories in *While the Billy Boils*, and suggest that with the realisation that he could not live by his writings in Australia, Lawson was deliberately extending the sketch stories that had made him famous, but kept him penurious in Australia, to the length preferred by English publishers of books and magazines. The risk, inherent in his fiction from the beginning, was that, in departing

21 Letter to Hugh MacCallum, Angus and Robertson, 30 December, 1897 in Roderick, *Letters*, p.82; letter to Beauchamp, 19 January 1900, *ibid.*, pp.112–14; and in Kiernan, pp.181–83.

from the austere realism of the sketch, he would succumb to his own worst 'literary' tendencies towards melodrama and sentimentality, tendencies he was better able to control in the sketch-based shorter fictions.

'The Hero of Redclay' epitomises this, as did Lawson's pursuit of success by experimenting with different popular forms. First announced as a novel (though Lawson in his letters to George Robertson soon changed his mind about his abilities to write one 'or something connected'),<sup>22</sup> it was attempted as a stage melodrama for Bland Holt, before receiving its final prose version as a story in *Over the Sliprails*. There was later also to be a verse version titled 'Ruth'.

The story enlists Mitchell as its narrator and the matter of Bourke for its setting to lend 'authenticity' to a contrived tale of noble self-sacrifice that, in its sentiments, is reminiscent of such apprentice pieces as 'The Tale of Malachi', and anticipates the sentimentalising of the 'Bush' that was soon to occur in London. Colin Roderick tells us that after the turn of the century Lawson insisted on the capital 'B' to 'designate the ideal inhabitants of his ideal commonwealth' and to distinguish this from any actual rural society. In the article 'Crime in the Bush' for the *Bulletin* in 1899 the lower case bush is remembered as a place of unnatural horrors—murders, arson, incest, feuds—bred out of isolation, hardship and ignorance. But in 'The Hero of Redclay' the idealised Bush—'the ideal social setting for unselfishness, mateship, nobility, and virtues of all kinds, but also the alien force that vitiated the heroism of these virtues'—is already apparent.<sup>23</sup>

In the *Bulletin* in 1899 also appeared "Pursuing Literature in Australia", a review of his career, which ended bitterly with his advice for the young Australian writer to somehow get to England, the United States, anywhere else—or shoot himself. A. G. Stephens's rejoinder to this in his own magazine, the *Bookfellow*, pointed out it was Lawson's own poor business sense in selling his copyright for immediate return that was responsible for the poor return from his books, not Australia which 'admires and loves and liberally encourages him'.<sup>24</sup> Stephens

22 Roderick, *Letters*, pp.63–64; Kiernan, pp.181–83.

23 Colin Roderick, 'Commentary' in *The Bush Undertaker and Other Stories* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1970), p.264. See also his introduction to *Henry Lawson: Short Stories and Sketches* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1972), p.xix.

was right but, even so, the Australia which had responded so warmly to Lawson could not support him adequately through advances and royalties.

When he wrote to Earl Beauchamp asking for assistance to get to London, Lawson enclosed a copy of "Pursuing Literature in Australia", and claimed, with exaggeration, that there was no market for purely Australian literature within Australia itself'. There was, as Lawson had shown, but he had also found that it was not large enough to support him fully as a self-employed writer. With the assistance from Beauchamp and others, he was able to sail with his family (which now included two-month old Bertha) to the literary metropolis, as he had been preparing himself to do since at least his stay at Mangamaunu. He also left with the intention of helping an aspiring young Australian writer, having arranged to have sent on to him in London the manuscript of Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*.

Outwardly, at least, the move to England seemed to bring the success that Lawson had been seeking. After a couple of weeks in London on their arrival, the family settled in the village of Harpenden, Hertfordshire. As he recounts in "Succeeding": A Sequel to "Pursuing Literature", he engaged the pioneering literary agent James B. Pinker, who acted for some of the most prominent writers of the day, including Conrad, James, Wells, Kipling and Bennett, and was advised to concentrate on 'good work' rather than attempt to calculate what would suit the London market.<sup>25</sup>

He contributed to such prestigious literary magazines as *Blackwood's*, *Cassell's*, and *Chambers'*. William Blackwood proposed republication of *While the Billy Boils*, and a selection from this, together with a dozen stories from *On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails*, was published in 1901 as *The Country I Come From*. Also from the same publisher in the same

24 A. G. Stephens, 'Lawson and Literature', *Bookfellow*, 18 February 1899, in Roderick, *Criticism*, p.81.

25 A. G. Stephens extracted some passages from this sequel to 'Pursuing Literature', and published them as 'The Sweet Uses of London' in the *Bulletin*, October 1903. The remainder of the manuscript is among the Lothian paper in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne, together with that of 'Going on the Land' referred to below. They were first published in Brian Kiernan, ed., *The Essential Henry Lawson* (Currey O'Neil, Kew, Vic., 1982).



year appeared a new collection, *Joe Wilson and His Mates*. In 1902 Methuen brought out another new collection, *Children of the Bush*. With three books within two years, Lawson had made an impression in the literary metropolis, most notably on Edward Garnett, who wrote a laudatory appreciation of Lawson as a critical realist, the imaginative interpreter of Australian life.

The four Joe Wilson stories from the first of these new collections are generally regarded as the peak of Lawson's artistic development. In them, the move towards the more expansive form of the magazine story, while still retaining the 'authenticity', the austerity and edge, of the earlier sketch stories, reaches its fullest elaboration. So much so that the sequence as a whole has been taken to be another attempt, following the abortive 'The Hero of Redclay', at writing a novel and answering A. G. Stephens's criticisms of the lack of structure in *While the Billy Boils*. These had rankled with Lawson and, although he had recognised soon after that his talent was for short stories and sketches rather than 'a novel, or something connected', his correspondence while in England (and later referring back to that period) still mentions plans for a novel.

It is not clear, though, what Lawson understood by this term. Even Stephens's original remarks had been ambiguous: his demands for 'unity of ideas and treatment' could have been satisfied by a narratively-linked story cycle, such as the Joe Wilson sequence provides, or a more thematically and modally composed collection in the volume as a whole (such as Lawson claimed he had aimed at with *While the Billy Boils*, but was never to achieve). Lawson was most likely envisaging a number of formal possibilities when he wrote later of constructing a novel, 'a Bush strike novel' or 'an Australian novel' with 'A Child in the Dark and a Foreign Father' as the opening chapter.<sup>26</sup>

But the assumption he would have seen as underlying Stephens's use of the term, that a longer, continuous narrative is superior to short stories, would have been widely shared by publishers and readers. If false aesthetically, such a hierarchical view was sound commercially, as Lawson would have been well aware. Should the sequence of Joe Wilson stories be taken to indicate the form Lawson had in mind when

26 Letter to Edward Garnett, 27 (or 28) February 1902 (original in Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas; photocopy in Chaplin Lawson Collection, Rare Books, University of Sydney Library); letter to Thomas Lothian, 18 March 1907, in Lothian Papers, La Trobe Library.

he referred to his intentions of writing a novel? And does it fall within our understanding of what a novel may be, an understanding which is perhaps more accommodating today because of formal experimentation since the turn of the century?

Beginning the first (but last written) story, 'Joe Wilson's Courtship', the reader might initially be put off by the sentimental narrator with his reiterated advice to 'make the most of your courting days, you young chaps', and be reminded of Lawson himself at his self-pitying and moralising worst. Joe and Lawson are close: the sense we have from the tone that the narrator is a version of the author's self is reinforced by details, throughout the whole sequence, that are recognisably drawn from the family romance of Lawson's childhood. (The recently identified fragment of another Joe Wilson story, 'Going on the Land', is a fictionalised version of a neighbour's, Spencer's, death recorded in the autobiography—and also an indication of the loosely (auto)biographical structure Lawson later had in mind for an extended Joe Wilson series or 'novel'.)

Although Bertha claimed that she and Henry in Manamaunu were the models for Mary and Joe, Lawson was not drawing directly and exclusively on his own experience. While he set the stories in the area in which he had grown up, the time in which the events take place is vaguely that of an earlier generation; and Joe's courtship of May has echoes of Peter Larsen's courtship of Louisa and Henry Albury's of Harriet Winn in Lawson's, Louisa's and Gertrude's reminiscences. The rosebush, the grapevine, and the ivy that weave their elusively suggestive pattern in the first story might remind readers familiar with the total text of the family romance of Louisa's plantings at Eurunderee, but in their fictional context they take on an imaginative resonance to serve the story's theme—a classically literary one—of *carpe diem*, or 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may'.

Instead of a single source in personal history being drawn on, Lawson's own, his parents', his grandparents' reminiscences and those of his Uncle Job and Aunt Gertrude Falconer at Lahey's Creek (she was also a model for 'The Drover's Wife')<sup>27</sup> are conflated, and relocated in the eternal Arcady of courtship. Those with an eye for autobiographical

27 Letter to Frank Beaumont Smith, n.d. (June 1916), in Roderick, *Letters*, pp.248–49.

correspondence will also detect aspects of the author distributed among the characters other than Joe Wilson: Joe's friend Jack, who is poetical and inclined to be sentimental about himself, and Romany, with the gipsy blood that Lawson was romantically inclined to claim for himself.

Despite the maundering tone of the opening, the interplay between the two ages—the golden age of youth that the garrulous older Joe remembers with nostalgia, and the actuality the younger Joe experiences—is controlled with assurance by the author behind the narrator to bring out the story's, and the story cycle's, theme of the precariousness and transience of all happiness. While this theme is dramatically pursued in the second (but first written) story, 'Brighten's Sister-in-law', with Joe fearing his young son (named Jim, like Lawson's own) will die in a convulsive fit, the tone and structure are quite different.

Again there is a conflation of personal experiences (Lawson's memories of himself as a child and a father) and again the literary element is marked, but this time with some unfortunate melodramatic effects when Joe sees the apparition of a woman above the trees and imagines the black horse racing beside him. In contrast with this literary inflation is the presentation of Brighten's shanty and his sister-in-law which has all the precision of detail in the earlier sketch stories and is like these in allowing the details (the black bottle, the polished tins, the old china) to suggest rather than explain the anomalies and enigmas met with in the bush.

'Water Them Geraniums', the key story (or stories, because 'A Lonely Track' and 'Past Carin' that comprise it were written separately and in reverse order) contains a succession of sketches: the Wilsons' selection, memories of Gulgong, the Spicer lad who arrives with the gift of meat on his remarkable horse ('Jack Cornstalk in His Teens', as he had appeared in another version in the *Australian Star* in 1899), the Spicer selection. If it seems *the* great Lawson story quintessentially, it would be because it contains so many of the subjects and themes found in his earlier writing. Mrs Spicer is his mature version of the Drover's Wife, with the same incongruous interest in fashion plates, the same ridiculous experience of putting her finger through a hole in her handkerchief; though, significantly, this incident is dramatised rather than directly narrated in this version, and it is Mary who insists on the civilising ritual of the Sunday promenade. Much other 'material' from earlier stories and

sketches, in verse as well as prose, can be glimpsed in it, but we are not left with a sense of fragmentation because it all forms part of Joe's perception of Mrs Spicer, and of his own wife whom he has brought to what seems 'no place for a woman'.

To compare 'Water Them Geraniums' with the earlier sketches, say 'The Drover's Wife', is to appreciate the nature of Lawson's development during his most creative decade. The ability to present a succession of precise, authenticating details and leave them to suggest their deeper significance is the constant characteristic of his most imaginative writing over this time. Here, the geraniums especially have such a bedraggled particularity that one would not want to belabour their simultaneously metaphoric function in suggesting Mrs Spicer's hopes of 'something better—something higher'. At the same time, the whole story is much more fully dramatised than the earlier sketch stories: through the interaction of more characters, through dialogue, and through Joe's narration, which produces a distancing, a filtering of effect that might otherwise have been sentimentalising or defeatedly pessimistic.

To attempt to do justice to 'Water Them Geraniums', one falls back lamely on hackneyed and fulsome appeals to 'life', 'compassion' and 'the human condition'. Nothing in Australian writing looks further into the emptiness of life for the individual and yet finds some meaning in it, through Mrs Spicer's gruff love for her children and her hopes for their future, even though their lives seem as blighted as those geraniums. While its power is reinforced by its place in the sequence as a whole, with its recurrent theme of the bush as 'no place for a woman', and with drink, madness, or death as the only means of escape, it also stands completely achieved within itself.

'A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek' rounds the sequence off in an open way by showing the Wilsons enjoying some prosperity and experiencing again some of the happiness of their courting days. It is, in a lighter, more simply sentimental vein, a variation on the sequence's theme of the evanescence of happiness within life's predominantly melancholy course which allows some happiness to be recaptured, at least momentarily. While self-contained, 'A Double Buggy' depends more than the preceding stories on its place in the sequence for it to achieve its full effect, and win the readers' interest in its characters and their domestic situation.

Internally, then, the cycle of four stories as it appeared in *Joe Wilson*

*and His Mates* has its thematic interconnections, and a cumulative effect transcending that obtained when each part is read separately. But these are only some characteristics of the novel, whereas they are distinguishing attributes of the 'discontinuous' short story narrative. While having linking characters and concerns, such narratives need not be consistent in mode or characterisation, nor causally related, and so can present a different view of life, of the way things happen, than novels, or at least the paradigms of the novel Lawson would have known. Seeing the Joe Wilson sequence as significantly structured to express the discontinuous and discrete nature of the individual experience frees it of the imputation that it falls short of achieving another (and, it is assumed, superior) form.

But after these stories were published, Lawson wrote to William Blackwood and Edward Garnett that he was working towards a novel. Did he see the Joe Wilson cycle as such, or in embryo? This issue, as it has become in Lawson criticism, is not finally a matter of facts (though there is the indisputable fact that, whatever his intentions, Lawson was never to write a novel), but of interpretation—of what a novel is, and what Lawson meant by the term.

Little was known about Lawson's time in England until recently (and many personal details remain uncertain), and no certain chronology had been established for the composition of some of his most famous stories which appeared while he was there. This obviously presented any critical biographer with problems in interpreting the fullest body of evidence, the writings. Were the Joe Wilson stories written earlier at Mangamaunu (as Bertha claimed), and others, like 'The Loaded Dog' and 'Telling Mrs Baker', before Lawson left for London, so that his best late fictions were completed in anticipation of English publication?

In his postscript to the four Joe Wilson stories in the book, Lawson states that 'Brighten's Sister-in-law' was written first. Lawson is not always reliable on such details, but Colin Roderick has located Blackwood's letter accepting this story on 13 August 1900. The letter Blackwood wrote on 10 October 1900, enclosing proofs of 'your excellent sketch "Brighten's Sister-in-law"' and accepting 'A Double Buggy' would seem to be the letter Lawson recalls in "Succeeding". If this more recently discovered manuscript is accepted as reliable, it further suggests that 'Brighten's Sister-in-law' was 'the simple domestic little Bush story' that Lawson wrote after meeting Pinker, and that the Joe

Wilson series was begun in England.

Pinker's accounts to Lawson for typing (in the Chaplin Lawson Collection, Rare Books, University of Sydney Library) reinforce this by showing that 'Brighten's Sister-in-law' was typed in July 1900. It appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* for November 1900, and was followed by 'A Double Buggy', "'Past Carin'", 'Joe Wilson's Courtship' and 'A Lonely Track'. While the correspondence with Blackwood establishes that Lawson was working to a plan for a Joe Wilson series, it was much more loosely conceived than the presentation of the four stories in *Joe Wilson and His Mates* would suggest, and included the Peter M'Laughlan stories in which Joe is either the narrator or a secondary character. Having been rejected by Blackwood, these stories were to appear in *Children of the Bush*.

Colin Roderick plausibly conjectures that a house editor or reader, possibly Edward Garnett, or Arthur Maquarie (the friend described in "'Succeeding'") proposed the arrangement of the stories for book publication. Roderick's reconstruction of Lawson's work while in England (which is confirmed by Pinker's accounts for typing) shows him continuing to write spasmodically in various modes and moods, rather than concentrating on a sustained project. Yet, and despite the letter he had written to George Robertson in January 1897, in which he had recognised he was not a novelist, Lawson's correspondence to Blackwood and Garnett shows he retained an ambition to write a 'novel', perhaps the 'single, plotted, climaxed story' A. G. Stephens had suggested, or some otherwise unified volume.<sup>28</sup>

(If Lawson had not conceived the Joe Wilson sequence as a 'novel', he came to consider the possibility of its becoming one. In 1907, on 18 March, he wrote to Thomas Lothian from the *Bulletin* office that "'A Child in the Dark" was commenced in England as an Australian novel,

<sup>28</sup> Colin Roderick, 'Henry Lawson's *Joe Wilson*: Skeleton Novel or Short Story Sequence?', *Overland* 66 (1977), 35–47. See also, John Barnes, 'Henry Lawson in London', *Quadrant* (July 1979), 24–35. Both articles quote correspondence between Blackwood and Lawson, and Barnes the correspondence between Garnett and Lawson. Photocopies of the latter are in the Chaplin Lawson Collection, Rare Books, University of Sydney; for a description see Harry F. Chaplin, *Henry Lawson: His Books, Manuscripts, Autograph Letters and Association Copies*, Studies in Australian Bibliography (Wentworth Press, Surry Hills, N.S.W., 1974), pp.72–73.

but broken off and published as a leading Xmas *Bulletin* story. I have great hopes for a novel.' A scribbled note listing the proposed contents of *Triangles of Life*, which includes 'A Child in the Dark' and the later Joe Wilson stories 'Drifting Apart' and 'James and Maggie', has 'A Child in the Dark' struck out with the remark alongside, 'To complete Joe Wilson'. This, and the fragment 'Going on the Land', also among the Lothian Papers, suggest that Lawson saw his (auto)biographically related, but discontinuous sequence of stories as potentially the 'novel' he still hoped to write—though by this time he was having great difficulty in putting any kind of new collection together.)

While, as a collection, *Joe Wilson and His Mates* again fell short of Lawson's proclaimed ideal of a composed volume (to fill it out, he included some reworked material reaching as far back as 1894), it contained two other classic stories written in England which show him working in other modes and moods. 'The Loaded Dog' is not merely a splendid example of one kind of comic magazine tale, an Australian version of 'frontier humour', but it also has its dark and Promethean overtones—which might be why it is such a perennial favourite of children. The retribution that is visited blindly and excessively on the nasty yellow dog also wreaks its toll on the innocents among the canine population; they resignedly have to suffer with the guilty the effects of Andy Page's working in mysterious ways.

'Telling Mrs Baker' also has its resonances and unresolved implications. Critical opinion is divided (and is likely to remain so) whether this story's ending, with the girl from the city telling both narrators 'I like the Bushmen! They are grand men—they are noble' and kissing them, topples into sentimentality, or retains its precarious balance with the laconic nudge from the final line, 'I don't think it did either of us any harm'. But scholastic attempts to resolve the contrasting modulations Lawson is offering simultaneously might distract us from the story's revealing dramatisation of an artistic decision for its author. These are two versions of Baker's death, the true story which Jack tells us and the fiction his mate Andy invents to tell the widow. The difference is between a faithful sketch from life, which emerges as 'squalid' realism, or a fictional artifice which, while it runs the risk of seeming false or evasive, succeeds, with equal plausibility, to invert the truth, grant Baker some human worth, and impose some dignity on his death.

Regardless of how successful Lawson is seen in balancing realism and romance at the story's end, their opposition is central to its whole conception. To ask which is, artistically, the preferable version—Jack's 'true' but inherently nihilistic account, or Andy's false but consoling fiction—is to recognise Lawson's awareness, through *his story*, of problematical relationships between life and art. There are a number of references to art and artifice here—the reproduction of Wellington's heroic meeting with Blucher at Waterloo, with the dead heaped up 'a bit extra', the *Sydney Illustrated Journal*, the sister who has written for the *Bulletin*. But there is no suggestion that Andy's story is bad art, even though the sister suspects he has not told the truth. She approves of the way he has reshaped it to meet conventional expectations, to familiarise it, and to leave for his family some sense of meaning and value in his life.

This can be read as a paradigm of Lawson's own artistic development: he also had sought to be true to remembered experience, to sketch it accurately, yet to discover within it a value that would give some meaning to otherwise pointless, inhuman, or unendurable existence. Looking ahead to Lawson's next collection, *Children of the Bush*, 'Telling Mrs Baker' can be seen as hovering over a decisive brink: Lawson's artistic decision was to side with Mrs Baker's sister and her idolisation of the capitalised Bushmen, to prefer the consolations of the romantic (if still ostensibly realistic) version to the disturbing truth of remembered experience.

Technically, the stories in *Children of the Bush* (which was published by Methuen in 1902, after Lawson had departed for Australia) continue the pattern of extending the manner, and matter, of the earlier sketch stories into magazine stories. But a new development in Lawson's attitudes to the bush is obvious. 'Send Round the Hat', 'That Pretty Girl in the Army', 'Lord Douglas', 'Shall We Gather at the River?' 'His Brother's Keeper' would be the stories we would look to first of all for the enunciation of the creed of mateship and to find Lawson in the role of, as in H. P. Heseltine's ironic title, 'Saint Henry—Our Apostle of Mateship'. The verse epigraph to the collection, 'The Shearers', sums up the sentiments of the creed with a simple, moving eloquence, the colloquialisms checking any more fulsome and fervid tendencies. But this is not the view of the bushmen that Lawson had conveyed through his earlier writings. In them, although mateship could be sentimental,



in the relations between parents and children, or even a man and his dog, it was more often problematical as a social code, seeming 'a combination of cruel practical joking, irresponsible behaviour, and, occasionally, even dishonesty'.<sup>29</sup>

The stories in *Children of the Bush* lack these incongruous elements found in the best of earlier pieces, even the humorous tales, when Lawson is presenting the relationships between men facing a hard world together. In being rounded out, such rough edges are smoothed away; a sense of community is discovered among social reprobates, warm hearts are found to beat beneath the roughest of exteriors, and one touch of kindness is shown to make the whole world kin.

We can enjoy the more novelistic narration of these stories, with their greater amplification of character and situation, while still recognising that they are magazine stories for which those comparisons with Bret Harte, that Lawson had so much resented earlier, are not inappropriate. Their conventions are not only those of heart-warming Victorian sentimental melodrama—already dated by the time they were written—but also Lawson's own, those he had created in his earlier work. His vernacular narrators and by now stereotyped 'typical' characters, the matter of Bourke and the matter of Eurunderee, are drawn on mechanically to win his audience's acceptance of them as familiar and 'authentic'. For example, 'Gentleman-Once' begins: 'Peter M'Laughlan, Bush missionary, Joe Wilson and his mate Jack Barnes, shearers for the present, and a casual swagman named Jack Mitchell, were camped at Cox's Crossing in a bend of Eurunderee Creek'.

Instead of being the beginning of an apparent 'sketch from life' that, like 'Going Blind' or 'Water Them Geraniums', develops into a sketch story of magazine length, this is the conventional opening to a magazine story which enlists these familiar characters, and this setting, in the hope of looking an 'authentic' Lawson story. From extending sketches towards the length of magazine stories, Lawson has come nearly full circle, to writing conventional stories that pretend to be sketched from life. Out of his memories of Bourke in '92 and '93, and out of the family romance, he is creating an ideal world that answers to his homesickness in England, his nostalgia for a simpler past, and his humanitarian

29 H. P. Heseltine, 'Saint Henry—Our Apostle of Mateship', *Quadrant* 1 (1960), in Roderick, *Criticism*, p.347.

sympathies, now detached from the political causes he had espoused in more youthful years.

'Send Round the Hat' presents itself as a sketch story, with its writer-narrator Harry, who is painting a hotel in Bourke (as Lawson himself had done), sketching from life the Giraffe and other typical locals and recounting a revealing incident. Essentially, though, it is preaching the social gospel in the homely terms of mateship, with the Giraffe as a simple saintly figure protecting the women taken in adultery. As part of this sketch's fuller fictionalisation, Mitchell is allowed his wry worldly observations, which contribute to the dramatisation of Harry as another simple decent character in the story. But innocence and instinctive charity win hands down over Mitchell's cynical realism when Harry, back in the squalid, selfish city, adds the final, framing paragraph.

This might well remind us of the sentiments at the end of Paterson's 'Clancy of the Overflow', but it is written almost a decade after the 'Sydney or the Bush' debate with the 'Banjo', and Lawson's return from Bourke vowing never to go bush again. 'Send Around the Hat' can be enjoyed as a sentimental and humorous homily, but it is not what could have been expected from the author of 'The Union Buries Its Dead' and the other earlier stories and sketches of Bourke. And its greater technical sophistication does not mark an artistic advance over even the earliest stories: 'The Drover's Wife', with that apparent 'artlessness' contemporary readers appreciated, remains more 'authentic' and imaginatively powerful than this story with its artful, fluent and varied narrative procedures.

Like 'Send Around the Hat', 'Lord Douglas' parables a tenet of practical Christianity—in its case 'Love thy enemies ...' In 'That Pretty Girl in the Army', we are told that the lovable reprobates of Bourke observe the social gospel by their deeds rather than by heeding the cant of institutionalised religion. But through its action this story has another subversive purpose—to assert the power of love to find its way despite the repressiveness of the self-righteous. It is a frontier variation on the traditional comic scenario of love confounding the puritans. Inserted into it are a variety of realistic elements: digressive passages on bush socialism and mateship, a speculation by the author on what he would be writing if this were fiction and not truth, brief sketches of Bourke and some of its notable characters in '92, the modelling of the Pretty Girl on Hannah Thornburn. But these flashes of 'local colour' only make

it more reminiscent of Bret Harte (who, in the story itself, a sentimental shearer has been reading).

A sentimentalised 'realism' is also found in 'Shall We Gather By the River?', the first of the stories about the bush missionary, and explicit Christ figure, Peter M'Laughlan. When he translates the Sermon on the Mount into local terms for the Eurunderee congregation, every sentence seems to go straight to someone present:

I believe he looked every soul in the eyes before he had done. Once he said something and caught my eye, and I felt a sudden lump in my throat. There was a boy there, a pale, thin, sensitive boy who was eating his heart out because of things he didn't understand. He was ambitious and longed for something different from this life; he'd written a story or two and some rhymes for the local paper; his companions considered him a 'bit ratty' and the grown-up people thought him a 'bit wrong in his head', idiotic, or at least 'queer'. And during his sermon Peter spoke of 'unsatisfied longings', of the hope of something better, and said that one had to suffer much and for long years before he could preach or write; and then he looked at that boy. I knew the boy very well; he has risen in the world since then. (II, p.24)

That such a self-indulgently sentimental story as this, or the other M'Laughlan and Bourke stories were written around the same time as the Joe Wilson sequence, 'The Loaded Dog' and 'Telling Mrs Baker' is revealing about Lawson's nature as a writer. While in England and at the peak of his career, he continued his habit of working simultaneously in a variety of modes and moods. Despite references in letters to his intentions, or ambitions, to write a novel, he was still writing hurriedly and anxiously to maintain his family. Financially and temperamentally, he was not able to forgo journalism and devote himself to consciously 'artistic' writing ('good work' in Pinker's phrase)—a distinction that was perhaps foreign to him after his years as a freelance in Australasia. It was not as though there were the Joe Wilson and other admired stories, and then the nostalgic and sentimental tales, so that we could enquire what went wrong, and when precisely, in the events of his life (his own unspecified illness he mentioned in letters and in 'Succeeding', Bertha's breakdown and the strains on their marriage) which might

explain the marked inconsistency in the quality of the fiction written in England.

The pattern of conflicting tendencies in his writing observable from the beginning continued. He was still torn between a realistic and a romantic 'literary' impulse, still either resisting or succumbing to the temptations to sentimentalise, melodramatise, moralise. (A related pattern can be seen in the fluctuations between idealism and scepticism, even an embittered cynicism at times, in his social and political attitudes; shifts in these though are too complicated to attempt to discuss here.) The achievement of the Joe Wilson sequence can be seen, in personal artistic terms, as his holding in balance these conflicting tendencies.

While, in terms of publication and recognition, the visit to England seemed to bring at least the beginnings of the security he was seeking, these outward indications of success did not have their correspondences in his personal life. In May 1901, Bertha was admitted to Bethlem Royal Hospital, presumably suffering a nervous breakdown from trying to cope with two young children and an unstable husband in a strange environment. After her release in August, the Lawsons lived in the village of Charlton (where Henry had shared a cottage with Arthur Maquarie during Bertha's absence, the children having been boarded out in a neighbouring village) before moving back to London. There Mary Cameron, now Gilmore, and her husband stayed with them on their way home from Paraguay.

Bertha decided to return with the Gilmores, taking the children and leaving Henry to finish preparing *Children of the Bush* for the press. He followed the next month, May 1902, and through an accident to their ship overtook them in Colombo. In Adelaide, Henry left the ship and travelled by rail to Melbourne, presumably to see Hannah Thornburn—only to find that she had died the previous month. At the end of 1902, having returned to Sydney with his family, Lawson threw himself off a cliff near Manly, sustaining only minor injuries. The years of conspicuous decline, personal and artistic, had begun.

The apparent suddenness of Lawson's personal and artistic deterioration after his return from London would seem to call for explanation in psychological terms. A dependence on alcohol and a strained, then broken marriage (Bertha won a judicial separation in 1903) were the outward

symptoms, and possible causes—though it is not hard to think of other writers for whom drink and emotional disturbance have acted as stimulants. For Lawson's biographers, to account for the collapse of his personality would be challenging enough, even if there were complete and reliable records of these years. (New evidence was uncovered in 1981, when a selection of the manuscripts and letters Lawson sold the Melbourne publisher Thomas Lothian was published; more may still come to light. A known source of possibly revealing information is the records of Bertha's admission to Bethlem Royal Hospital, which in the normal course will not become available this century.)<sup>30</sup>

The most substantial body of evidence the biographer has available is Lawson's own writings: three volumes of verse, two of prose, and one of letters in Colin Roderick's edition.<sup>31</sup> For even in his periods of adversity and the long years of physical and mental deterioration, Lawson remained a writer, translating experience into language, even if only fitfully into literature, after 1902. The course of his life only glancingly illuminates, and certainly does not explain, how he came to produce his best work. Close examinations of this though have suggested aspects of his artistic personality that knowledge of his life, especially his formal education and reading, would not lead us to expect; for example, his conscious literariness which manifests itself in such contradictory ways. Why he declined as an artist cannot be answered confidently by positing any single cause, but the complicated pattern of his development and the nature of the decline can be described, as it has been by A. A. Phillips, T. Inglis Moore and by Brian Matthews.<sup>32</sup>

In *The Receding Wave*, Matthews demonstrates from the writings how the artistic decline was not sudden, nor the consequence of the period in England, but that the seeds of it were there in Lawson's work

30 *La Trobe Library Journal*, Henry Lawson issue 7 (October, 1981); information from Russel Meares, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Sydney.

31 *Collected Verse*, 1967, 1968, 1969; *Letters*, 1970; *Short Stories and Sketches* and *Autobiographical and Other Writings*, both 1972 (all Angus and Robertson, Sydney).

32 A. A. Phillips, *Henry Lawson* (Twayne, New York, 1970); T. Inglis Moore, 'The Rise and Fall of Henry Lawson', *Meanjin* 4 (1957), in Roderick, *Criticism*, pp.316–28; Brian Matthews, *The Receding Wave* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1972).[Colin Roderick in *Henry Lawson: A Life* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1991) argues persuasively that Lawson inherited a predisposition towards manic-depression.]

from much earlier (as were the propensities in him towards alcoholism and emotional instability). As we have seen, the conflicting tendencies in his fiction between the conventionally 'literary' and his individual, symbolically suggestive realism are apparent from his very first story. The subsequent course of his development does not describe a steady rise then fall, but constant fluctuations between these opposed tendencies until early this century.

To ask if drink and emotional disturbance caused the decline in the quality of his writing, or if instead it were waning imaginative powers and the exhaustion of the inspiration he had drawn from Eurunderee and Bourke, is to make an ultimately artificial distinction between the inner, artistic personality and the outer, social life which contained it. Although their interrelationship remains elusive, with Lawson's imaginative development continuing until 1902, despite the itinerant and unsettled course of his social life, the two proceeded together, as did the conflicting impulses in his fiction.

Critical preferences today (which should not necessarily be assumed to be at odds with those of Lawson's time) would exclude the melodramatically and sentimentally resolved in favour of stories seemingly uncontrived in their structures and ironic or comic in tone. These preferences, influenced by modernism, have led later critics to seek (and enjoy some conspicuous successes in finding) the modern artist within the late Victorian writer. Such discrimination which locates the artistic core within Lawson's prolific writings of all kinds is necessary, but, at the same time, too ruthless a selection according to these preferences can mask the persistent attraction towards melodrama and sentimentality throughout his work. Thus it can throw into false relief the issue of why he declined, suggesting a sudden and total artistic reversal during his time in England or immediately after.

To turn the question around, to ask instead how a late Victorian colonial with Lawson's disadvantages, working under constant pressure in the popular newspaper and magazine markets, and responding to a confusing conflict of models and influences, came to produce a substantial body of imaginative prose that still meets the severest critical demands, and commands an ever growing popularity, might be to put the question of his decline into more perspective.

After the return to Australia, he continued to draw on the same sources of inspiration, returning to the landscape of childhood for 'A Romance of Three Huts' and for another tale of heroic self-sacrifice with 'Roll Up at Talbragar'; to tall folk yarns and comic tales; and, increasingly, to personalised journalistic sketches like 'The Rising of the Court'. He was working all the old veins—characters, settings, modes and themes—with decreasing energy and imaginative return, trying to recapture, or at least exploit, his earlier successes. There was also the verse, reams of it as always. On this, it is virtually obligatory to quote Vance Palmer's reference to 'the primrose path to the eternal bonfire', which, in the main, is cruelly true because so much of it was written on the spot by a desperate man for the price of a drink.<sup>33</sup>

Some time after the judicial separation from Bertha in 1903, Lawson went to live with Mrs Isabel Byers, a woman in her mid-fifties who had worked in and kept a number of boarding houses. About the same age as Louisa, Mrs Byers became the 'Little Mother' to the poet she admired, and she was to care for him at a succession of addresses, mainly the North Sydney area, for most of his remaining twenty years.

Between 1905 and 1910, Lawson was imprisoned seven times for arrears of maintenance, and was admitted constantly to hospital for alcoholism. During these difficult years the managements of Angus and Robertson and the *Bulletin* showed great forbearance, and generosity, towards the increasingly spectral figure whose youthful writings they had been among the first to make so popular. But Lawson in his cups could be cantankerous and George Robertson had to ban him from his firm's premises in 1906 because of irresponsible behaviour.

Nevertheless Robertson brought out *Children of the Bush* as *Send Round the Hat* and *The Romance of the Swag* the following year, provided Bertha with a job and Mrs Byers with housekeeping money, and responded to Lawson's incessant battery of begging notes. A couple of years later, Lawson smashed some glass panels in the *Bulletin* office in one of his not infrequent fits of rage; and he paid for their replacement with his fee for the excerpts from his autobiography, then appearing in Archibald's *Lone Hand*.

Lawson was becoming the figure that Low captured in his cartoon

33 Vance Palmer, 'The Writer: Henry Lawson' in *National Portraits* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1940), p.166.

during the war years: the emaciated but genially grimacing 'character' with his Chaplinesque props of hat, stick and pipe, the trademark of his new identity as a living legend around town. The desperately sad, and at times unpleasant, personality behind this mask is glimpsed in the many letters begging money that he scribbled. But his mates who contributed to the 1931 memorial volume edited by Bertha and John Le Gay Brereton preferred to remember him not for his scrounging and intemperate outbursts but for his generosity (such as his habit of carrying small change to distribute among the North Sydney urchins) and the flashes of his old wit.

Even at his lowest, Lawson retained affection of his friends and the respect of admirers. Some formed a committee to assist him. Sister A. de V. McCallum of the Mental Hospital, a receiving house where Lawson often went to dry out, sought a Commonwealth pension for him, others a State stipend, both of which were eventually granted. In 1910 a number of friends, including Tom Mutch, twice N.S.W. Minister of Education, mounted a 'rescue operation' to get him out of the city and sent him for a holiday at Mallacoota with his old friend E. J. Brady. The same year, Angus and Robertson brought out his first new collection of prose since he had left London, *The Rising of the Court*.

In 1913, his 'Elder Man's Lane' series began appearing in the *Bulletin*: confabulatory and even maudlin as the embarrassing title suggests, these sketches, musings and stories project his personality at this time through the persona of 'John Lawrence'. Two other books appeared this year, verse in *For Australia* and prose (some of it dating back to the London period) in *Triangles of Life*, but from the Melbourne house of Lothian, as Angus and Robertson recognised that the quality was far below what they had published earlier.

The theme of the 'Elder Man's Lane' series—the loss of a more romantic past to the mechanised present—sums up Lawson's major preoccupations in his later writings, and reveals his Victorian consciousness, his inability to accept contemporary urban Australia. In *Children of the Bush* the evocation of the past had become nostalgic, an idealisation of those rural communities which previously he had presented with often sardonic realism. A similar process can be observed in his writing about Sydney after his return to Australia. The city is no longer presented as a succession of anonymous faces in the street and impersonal boarding houses; instead, as a defence against that sense of



alienation captured in his earlier writings, it is decentred, made suburban, folksy, and personal.<sup>34</sup>

In 1914, Lawson revisited Eurunderee twice, and nostalgically. Another revival of the past came a couple of years later when he met again a mate from the days of Bourke and the tramp to Hungerford, Jim Gordon, who wrote himself under the name of 'Jim Grahame'. They met and renewed their friendship on the irrigation area at Leeton where Lawson, with Mrs Byers, had been accommodated, officially to publicise it through his writings, unofficially to keep him away from alcohol as it was a 'dry' area. Neither plan was successful. His last prose series about 'Previous Convictions' was set here, where during 1917 he worked on the proofs of his *Selected Poems*. When Lawson returned from Leeton it was to resume his familiar round of life in Sydney, which Denton Prout describes as 'poverty, cadging, ill-health, bickerings with landlords, futile broodings, and short-lived resolutions to "pull himself" together'.<sup>35</sup>

He was depressed by the deaths of friends, including Archibald, and of his mother. Her driving energies had finally dissipated themselves in efforts to win credit for her contribution to the women's movement, and recompense for an improved mailbag fastener she had invented. In 1921 Lawson suffered a cerebral haemorrhage and was hospitalised. On 2 September 1922 he died in the cottage at Abbotsford he had been sharing with Mrs Byers. Typically, he was writing up until the last—and about the past. The article he had been working on was one of a series for *Aussie* magazine which recalled his visit to London twenty years before.

As Bourke, or 'the bush' generally, and then the Sydney of his youth, had receded in time and memory to become moral alternatives to the present, so finally the London of the crucial period in his artistic career was fondly recalled. The 'tragedy' of his life that the Longstaff portrait had reminded him of on his return from London had become a distant memory. Today, more than three quarters of a century after his death, he is remembered not for his personal failings and decline, but for the artistic triumphs he managed to achieve against such improbable odds.

34 See the next essay, 'Sydney or the Bush', for some further remarks on Lawson's later writings.

35 Denton Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer* (Rigby, Adelaide, 1963), p.287.