

# Henry Lawson's Socialist Vision

*Nothing is more difficult to find in this generation than an English writer who identifies himself successfully with the life of the working democracy, a writer who does not stand aloof from and patronise the bulk of the people who labour with their hands. This no doubt is because nearly all our writers have a middle-class bias and training, and so either write down to or write up to their subject when it leads them outside their own class, and accordingly their valuations thereof are in general falsified....*

*It is therefore an immense relief to the unsophisticated critic, after looking East and West and North and South for writers untainted by the ambition to be mentally genteel, to come across the small group of able democratic writers on the 'Sydney Bulletin', of whom Mr Lawson is the chief. (Edward Garnett)<sup>1</sup>*

Henry Lawson (1867–1922) was born on the Grenfell goldfield in New South Wales. His father was a Norwegian seaman who had jumped ship in Australia. His mother was the daughter of English immigrants. 'They were supposed to have come of English gipsies and were hop pickers in Kent', Lawson wrote in his uncompleted autobiography.<sup>2</sup> His parents separated and Lawson worked with his father as a carpenter and painter, and then went to live with his mother in Sydney:

I worked about in various private shops and did a bit of house-painting too. I knew what it was, when I was out of work for a few days in winter, to turn out shivering and be down at the Herald office at four o'clock on bitter mornings, and be one of the haggard group striking matches and running them down the

- 1 Edward Garnett, 'An Appreciation', *Academy and Literature* (8 March 1902), reprinted with revisions in Edward Garnett, *Friday Nights: Literary Criticism and Appreciations*, London, 1922, pp.181,182.
- 2 Henry Lawson, *Autobiographical and Other Writings 1887–1922*, ed. Colin Roderick (*Collected Prose*, volume 2), Sydney, 1972. All quotations are from this edition, noted as *CP*.

wanted columns on the damp sheets posted outside. I knew what it was to tramp long distances and be one of the hopeless crowd of applicants. I knew what it was to drift about the streets in shabby and patched clothes and feel furtive and criminal-like. I knew all that before I wrote 'Faces in the Street'—before I was twenty.<sup>3</sup>

In 1887 the Mayor of Sydney called a public meeting to plan celebrations for Queen Victoria's jubilee. The meeting and its immediate successors were taken over by republicans and freethinkers. 'Recent immigrants from the English working classes and the petty bourgeoisie touched with socialistic principles, aided by the old convict leaven, had humiliated the loyalists', writes Manning Clark.<sup>4</sup> A Republican Union emerged, attracting British born radicals like Thomas Walker, George Black and John Norton<sup>5</sup> as well as native radicals like J. D. Fitzgerald and Louisa Lawson. Within a month the *Republican* was launched and Henry helped print it, contributed political articles, and was registered publisher. When the Republican Union split after a year and the *Republican* ceased publication, Louisa took over the press to produce *The Dawn*, Australia's first woman's magazine. Henry continued to help print and to contribute. His first book, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse* (1894) was produced by Louisa on the *Dawn* press. It was in this context that Lawson wrote his first published poem, 'A Song of the Republic' which the *Bulletin* published on eight hours day, 1887.

Republicanism was—indeed, still is—a very broad category. It could express or conceal a number of political attitudes. It could be both robber baron capitalist or socialist revolutionary. The first issue of the *Republican* appeared on 4 July 1887—independence day for the United States of America, a country that had broken free of British imperialism and become a dynamic, capitalist nation. Both capitalist and communist

3 *CP*, 2, pp.209–10.

4 Manning Clark, *Henry Lawson, The Man and the Legend*, Melbourne, 1985, p.36. Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: a Life*, Sydney, 1991, pp.34ff.

5 Thomas Walker, b. Preston 1858, had arrived via San Francisco as a spiritualist lecturer. George Black, b. Edinburgh 1854, was a sub-editor on the *Bulletin* and later edited the *Workman* and the *Worker* and wrote *The Labor Party in New South Wales*, Sydney, 1917. John Norton, b. Brighton, U.K. 1858, became proprietor of *Truth* and is the subject of Cyril Pearl, *Wild Men of Sydney*, London, 1958 and Michael Cannon, *That Damned Democrat: John Norton an Australian Populist, 1858–1916*, Melbourne, 1981.

could use republicanism as a catch-cry. Much of the radical reputation of the *Bulletin*, established in 1880, derived from its republicanism. Disrespect for Queen Victoria, or Westminster, could be the assertiveness of the colonial businessman or the class hostility of the working person or unemployed. The displacement of class-aware radical activism from confronting the social and economic situation within Australia to inveighing against the imperial rule of Australia was one of the achievements of the *Bulletin*. Whereas anti-bourgeois or anti-capitalist sentiments were threatening the social order, the same feelings could be displaced into anti-monarchical or anti-imperialist expression and have a certain nationalist respectability.

The socialist direction of Lawson's republicanism was quite clear in the political ballads that he now published in the *Bulletin*: 'The Song of the Outcasts' (12 May 1888), 'Faces in the Street' (28 July 1888) and 'The Hymn of the Socialists' (24 August 1889). 'Song of the Outcasts' was reprinted in the Brisbane *Worker*, and under the title 'The Army of the Rear' widely reprinted in the USA. 'The Hymn of the Socialists' was reprinted in William Morris's *Commonweal* (30 November 1889).<sup>6</sup> Manning Clark has written of 'Faces in the Street':

This was poetic rhetoric, the confession or revelation of a warm and a passionate heart. It lacked any coherent ideology, and theory of history, or ideas on the future organization of society. It was a profession of faith in the power of the people to rectify their wrongs, to seek revenge against their oppressors.<sup>7</sup>

But what Clark presents as a lack of any coherent ideology was a strength of this and its companion poems. These were not divisive songs. They were not appropriate or acceptable only to a specific sect or group. Lawson's appeal is to all the oppressed and all the sympathisers with the oppressed. It is a popular front attitude: ballads that will focus on the shared aspects of radical movements, that will unify all the various sectional interest groups into a cooperative drive. The lack of 'any theory of history, or ideas on the future organization of society' allowed the

6 Anne Cranny-Francis. 'Pacifying the Socialist: The "Reform" of Henry Lawson's "The Hymn of the Socialists"', *Australian Literary Studies* 10 (1982): 511-15.

7 Clark, p.43.

ballad its place in the *Bulletin*. Its openness was strategic.

The especial force of 'Faces in the Street' was its showing poverty and oppression existed in this new world just as they existed in the old. The dominant myth was that Australia offered a new world free from those exploitations. 'The workingman's paradise', Henry Kingsley had called Australia in *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn* (1859). This mystification is confronted in 'The Song of the Outcasts':

I looked upon the mass of poor, in filthy alleys pent;  
And on the rich men's Edens, that are built on grinding rent;  
I looked o'er London's miles of slums—I saw the horrors there,  
And I swore to die a soldier of the Army of the Rear.<sup>8</sup>

And in case there was any remaining ambiguity that might claim these English conditions were not replicated in Australia, he opened 'Faces in the Street':

They lie, the men who tell us in a loud decisive tone  
That want is here a stranger, and that misery's unknown.

The programme Lawson offers is unambiguous:

But not until a city feels Red Revolution's feet  
Shall its sad people miss awhile the terrors of the street.<sup>9</sup>

The encouragement of nationalism of an Australian republican variety was a strategy that served to break down the powerful transnational working class alliances that were being established, notably demonstrated in the £31,000 collected in Australia and sent to support the London dockers. Lawson wrote:

I have seen the stern-faced unionists of Sydney gather in thousands  
(forming a meeting that had to be divided into three portions) and

8 Henry Lawson, *Collected Verse: Volume One: 1885–1900*, ed. Colin Roderick, Sydney, 1967, p.11. All quotations are from this edition, noted as CV. Henry Kingsley, *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*, London, 1859, volume 1, pp.103–4.

9 CV, 1, pp.15–17.

stand for five long hours arranging plans of campaign and subscribing funds to carry them out, simply because a body of men, whom they had never seen and who were separated from them by fifteen thousand miles of sea, sought their assistance against a bitter wrong. I refer to the great dock labourers' strike....<sup>10</sup>

The vision of international solidarity was stressed by E. W. O'Sullivan in the *Centennial Magazine*:

The working classes of Australasia are, in fact, the reserve force of their brothers and sisters in Great Britain, and at the crisis of the battle, they may be relied upon to enter the field and decide the control in favour of labour, if it has right and justice on its side. The London Dock Labourers' strike has opened up a new development of the conflict between capital and labour, and the probabilities are that further developments will take place, until the poor down-trodden industrial serf of Great Britain is enabled to tread the soil of Freedom with the elastic step of his Australasian brother.<sup>11</sup>

The success of the appeal and the expression of solidarity provided a major impetus to the expansion of the Australian union movement. The eight hour day had been first achieved by the stonemasons of New South Wales and Victoria in 1856. The iron workers and shipwrights achieved the eight hour day in 1872. 'The principal object which led to the formation of the few unions of the 'fifties and 'sixties was the desire to secure recognition of the eight hour day.'<sup>12</sup> The first intercolonial trades union conference was held in Sydney in 1879, the second in Melbourne in 1884, and thereafter the conference was held annually.<sup>13</sup> T. A. Coghlan wrote:

<sup>10</sup> CP, 2, p.17.

<sup>11</sup> E. W. O'Sullivan, *Centennial Magazine* (February 1890): 545-6, reprinted in R. N. Ebbels, ed., *The Australian Labor Movement 1850-1907*, Sydney, 1960, p.202.

<sup>12</sup> J. T. Sutcliffe, *A History of Trade Unionism in Australia* (1921), Melbourne, 1967, p.43.

<sup>13</sup> D. J. Murphy, ed., *The Big Strikes: Queensland 1889-1965*, St Lucia, 1983, p.33.

The strong feeling everywhere enlisted on behalf of the dock labourers exercised a very great influence upon the minds of the Labor leaders in Australia who did not discriminate too nicely between the position of the London dock labourers and that of the Australian workers.<sup>14</sup>

In 1889 the first of a series of shearers' strikes began in Queensland, against a refusal to employ union labour. The newly established Australian Labor Federation in Brisbane coordinated support from waterfront workers who refused to ship non-union shorn wool, and the strike was won. The success encouraged the unions to a more combative stance and the shipowners and pastoralists to combine to break the new movement. In August 1890 the Maritime Officers Association proposed to affiliate with the Melbourne Trades Hall Council. The shipowners refused to negotiate with the officers till they broke their Trades Hall affiliation; the officers walked off their ships and the wharf labourers and other maritime unionists came out in sympathy. The strike lasted two months, and was broken by the 'fairly large surplus of unemployed labor already on the market.'<sup>15</sup> Colonel Price's instructions to the Mounted Rifles on how to deal with massed strikers—'Fire low and lay them out'<sup>16</sup>—encapsulated the class war aspects of the strike. Lawson's poem 'The Lay-'em-Out Brigade' (*Truth*, 20 March 1892) alludes to the episode.

Lawson had been in Western Australia looking for work when the strike began. He returned to Sydney and then was offered work on the Brisbane *Boomerang*, a weekly paper established by William Lane in 1887. Lane, born in Bristol in 1861, had emigrated to the USA when he was 15, and then settled in Brisbane in 1885. The *Boomerang* ran into difficulties with advertisers because of its unionist sympathies, and Lane resigned to start Australia's first union paper, the *Worker*, backed by the Australian Labour Federation in Brisbane in 1890. Lawson worked for the *Boomerang* under its new owner, Gresley Lukin, from March till September 1891. At the same time he contributed to the *Worker*,

14 T. A. Coghlan, *Labor and Industry in Australia*, volume 4, Melbourne, 1897, cited in Murphy, p.52.

15 Sutcliffe, p.93.

16 Text in the *Worker*, (1 October 1890), reprinted in Ebbels, *Australian Labor Movement*, p.136.

a centre of radical activity in the bitter Queensland shearers' strike, which had begun in January 1891 against the employers' attempts to refuse the closed shop, and to reduce general labourers' wages by a third. The strike continued until June, by which time the union leaders had been arrested, the funds consumed, and non-union labour shipped into Queensland under military and police guard. Lawson's poem 'Freedom on the Wallaby' appeared in the *Worker* amidst the struggle: 'They need not say the fault is ours if blood should stain the wattle.'<sup>17</sup> It was cited in the Queensland parliament as evidence of a violent conspiracy, which provoked him to write another poem, 'The Vote of Thanks debate.'

William Lane was in the forefront of the movement to transform the old craft unions into a massive socialist federation. 'When the task of analysing and assigning the causes and effects and course of the phenomenon of Australian socialism, Lane's writing in the *Worker* will be found the *fons et origo* from which all further and subsequent explorations must begin.'<sup>18</sup> Lawson, recalled his brother-in-law, Jack Lang, later Labor premier of New South Wales, gave 'glowing reports about Lane.'<sup>19</sup>

The *Boomerang*, shortly to cease publication, reduced staff and Lawson returned to Sydney. He found work house-painting with a group of radical English immigrants, including W. A. Holman, later a Labor parliamentarian, and two former members of the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League, G. Chandler and A. G. Yewen, a personal friend of William Morris.<sup>20</sup>

When the trade failed me I used to write a column of red-hot socialistic and libellous political rhymes for *Truth*. I still believed in revolutions, and the spirit of righteousness upheld me. *Truth's* 'ghost' was eccentric, and the usual rates for outside contributions were from 5s. upwards; but John Norton gave me 15s. to £1 for special stuff. He cursed considerably; and there were times when

17 CV, 1, p.124.

18 A. St. Ledger, *Australian Socialism*, London, 1909, p.14.

19 J. T. Lang, *I Remember*, Sydney, 1956, p.17.

20 E. H. Lane, *Dawn to Dusk: Reminiscences of a Rebel*, Brisbane, 1939, p.13. On the influence of Morris in Australia see Bruce Mansfield, 'The Socialism of William Morris: England and Australia', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand* 7 (1956): 271-90.

it wasn't advisable to curse back; but he saw that I, and one or two other poor devils of scribblers on their uppers were paid—even before the comps. I haven't forgotten it.<sup>21</sup>

John Norton was born in England in 1858; he spent time in Europe, became a subeditor on the *Levant Herald* in Constantinople, and arrived in Sydney in 1884, establishing himself as a journalist. He wrote the report on the 1885 Intercolonial Trades Union Congress (TUC), and represented the unions at the English TUC Congress and the International TUC in Paris. In 1890 he joined the newly established *Truth*, a paper with radical sentiments, sensationalist copy, and various dubious business practices involving corrupt land deals and blackmailing businessmen into advertising rather than having their sexual foibles reported. Lawson's first contribution to *Truth*—signed 'Joe Swallow'—had been 'The Australian Marseillaise, or, A Song for the Sydney Poor', 23 November 1890, at a point when the maritime strike had been defeated. The Marseillaise was 'the then international revolutionary song of the world's workers,'<sup>22</sup> and was sung at socialist and union meetings. Lawson provides an appropriate revolutionary, class-war text.

Lawson's first story, 'His Father's Mate' (*Bulletin*, 22 December 1888) has as its central incident the death of a child helping his father on the gold workings. A subsidiary theme is the fate of the elder brother who got into trouble with the police and has disappeared. Drawing on a true incident told him by his grandfather,<sup>23</sup> Lawson presents the tragedy as emblematic of the wretchedness of working class life, with its limited choices of useless toil, death, or criminality. This same set of choices structures the group of stories he wrote about urban working class conditions and child labour: 'A Visit of Condolence' (*Bulletin*, 23 April 1892), 'Jone's Alley' (*Worker*, Sydney, 1, 8, 15 June 1892), 'Arvie Aspinall's Alarm Clock' (*Bulletin*, 11 June 1892) and 'Two Boys at Grinder Bros' (*Worker*, Sydney, 7 October 1893). Drawing on his own experiences working for a firm of coach-builders when he first arrived

21 CP, 2, p.112.

22 E. H. Lane, *Dawn to Dusk*, p.26.

23 Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson, Commentaries on his Prose Writings*, Sydney, 1985, p.5.



in Sydney, Lawson turns the experience of humiliation and exploitation into the weapons of political action. Bill, Arvie's young workmate, calls to find out why he's not at work, and is told he's dead. Talking to Arvie's mother he asks 'How old was Arvie?'

'Eleven.'  
'I'm twelve—going on thirteen. Arvie's father's dead, ain't he?'  
'Yes.'  
'So's mine. Died at his work, didn't he?'  
'Yes'.  
'So'd mine. Arvie told me his father died of something with his heart.'  
'Yes'.  
'So'd mine; ain't it rum? You scrub offices an' wash, don't yer?'  
'Yes'.  
'So does my mother. You find it pretty hard to get a livin', don't yer, these times?'<sup>24</sup>

The paralleling of shared experiences generalizes the individual tragedy into a larger class oppression. These are not individual calamities resulting from individual failure, but the consequence of the social order. Lawson uses the same device of parallelism in Bill's dialogue with Arvie in 'Two Boys at Grinder Bros'. This is the technique of socialist education, of awakening the oppressed to the nature of their conditions, to the shared exploitations. These stories have generally been labelled

24 Henry Lawson, *While the Billy Boils*, Sydney, 1896, p.211. All quotations from this edition. An English edition from Simpkin, Marshall appeared in 1897, jointly with Angus & Robertson, Sydney. E. V. Lucas reviewed it enthusiastically in the *Academy*, (17 July 1897):

He shows us what living in the bush really means. By force of sketch, dialogue, story and yarn, he brings before us the Bohemians and wastrels of that vast island: their humour, their way of thought, their vocabulary, their comradeship. The result is a real book, a book in a hundred. (Reprinted in Colin Roderick, ed. *Henry Lawson Criticism 1894–1971*, Sydney, 1972, p.65)

In 1903 Angus & Robertson published a joint edition with Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, London. In 1927 it was issued in two volumes in Jonathan Cape's 'Traveller's Library' (Nos. 38 and 39), London. See George Mackaness, *An Annotated Bibliography of Henry Lawson*, Sydney, 1951, pp.14–16.

Dickensian and sentimental by Lawson's commentators;<sup>25</sup> as if infant mortality, the exploitation of child labour, and slum life were somehow literary tropes and not all too common, everyday realities. That they were everyday realities was a provocation to political action. Lawson was developing a political consciousness that could work strategically, that could see in the individual suffering the basis for a shared sense of outrage. This was exactly William Lane's strategy in *The Workingman's Paradise* (1892), where the child born at the beginning of the novel dies at the beginning of part II, a victim of poverty and the unhygienic conditions of Sydney's slums. 'The Slaughter of the Innocents', Lane titled the chapter in which the child dies.<sup>26</sup> The dying child is not at all an easy sentimental trope but a directed, political symbol for Lawson, as for Lane. The death of Arvie Aspinall is the triggering or concluding incident for four stories: Lawson is not being wanton with death. Quite remarkably and significantly he does not give us a succession of deaths like a Jacobean dramatist or contemporary thriller writer. That he uses the one incident for a number of stories suggests a shocked reverence in its economy.

Arvie's work is described in the final section of the last story of the group, 'Two Boys at Grinder Bros':

Arvie was late out of the shop that evening. His boss was a subcontractor for the coach-painting, and always tried to find twenty minutes' work for his boys just about five or ten minutes before the bell rang. He employed boys because they were cheap and he had a lot of rough work, and they could get under floors and 'bogies' with their pots and brushes, and do all the 'priming' and paint the trucks. His name was Collins, and the boys were called 'Collins' Babies'. It was a joke in the shop that he had a 'weaning' contract. The boys were all 'over fourteen' of course, because of the Education Act. Some were nine or ten—wages from five shillings to ten shillings. It didn't matter to Grinder

25 A. G. Stephens, *Bulletin*, (29 August 1896), reprinted in A. G. Stephens: *Selected Writings*, ed. Leon Cantrell. Sydney, 1977, p.225; cf. Brian Kiernan, ed., *The Essential Henry Lawson*, South Yarra, 1982, p.14; John Barnes, *Henry Lawson's Stories*, Melbourne, 1985, p.13.

26 See the essay 'William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise*: Pioneering Socialist Realism', *infra*.

Brothers so long as the contracts were completed and the dividends paid. Collins preached in the park every Sunday. But this has nothing to do with the story.<sup>27</sup>

These details are presented almost perfunctorily, as if to say, these are the normal conditions of urban exploitation, why make anything of it, how can you be surprised? The perfunctory presentation of Arvie's death that concludes the story is in part a necessary strategy since Lawson had already published the three other Arvie Aspinall-Jones's Alley stories, so the event cannot be given in any full-blown way. But this suited Lawson's skill in the oblique, the understated. The perfunctory account of exploitation and death, undramatized, flatly recorded, serves as an explosive conclusion to the earlier dialogue between Bill and Arvie, the development of a relationship, from persecution to comradeship and solidarity. The story opened with Bill calling out 'Here comes Balmy Arvie' as he sat with 'five or six half-grown larrikins.'<sup>28</sup> But this first section ends with an expression of friendship, comradeship, mateship:

'Look here, Arvie!' he said in low, hurried tones, 'Keep close to me goin' out tonight, 'n' if any of the other chaps touches yer or says anything to yer I'll hit 'em!'<sup>29</sup>

What provokes the solidarity is Bill's perception of a shared pattern of class exploitation in the experiences of the two families. He realizes, silently yet so clearly—such is Lawson's art—that these are no serendipitous coincidences, but the demonstration of their shared situation as workers, as proletarians. Nothing is spelled out—there is no generalizing, no theory, no moral-drawing. The bare facts, presented in parallel, reveal the socio-political truth:

'I say, Arvie, what did yer father die of?'

'Heart disease. He dropped down dead at his work.'

Long, low intense whistle from Bill. He wrinkled his forehead and stared up at the beams as if he expected to see something

27 Henry Lawson, *On Track and Over the Sliprails*, Sydney, 1900, p.127.

28 *Ibid.*, p.123.

29 *Ibid.*, p.127.

unusual there. After a while he said, very impressively: 'So did mine.'

The coincidence hadn't done striking him yet; he wrestled with it for nearly a minute longer. Then he said:

'I suppose yer mother goes out washin'?'

'Yes.'

'N' cleans Offices?'

'Yes.'

'So does mine....'<sup>30</sup>

The details of Collins' Babies that seem so artlessly tacked on to the story are tacked on to take their true place. Lawson's theme is not restricted to presenting working-class conditions, the victims of exploitation. That is known, that is familiar. What Lawson is dealing with is the ending of divisions within the working-classes. The bullying and teasing that make Arvie's life a misery, the factionalism of the oppressed in picking on someone else to oppress, is here brought to an end by Bill's promise of solidarity. The story shows how the lumpenproletarian, semi-criminal, wanton aggression of the larrikins can nonetheless turn into supportive mateship. This is a socialist fable, and it was first published in the union paper the *Sydney Worker*. The larrikins don't suddenly become respectable bourgeois citizens. The action describes the transformation of random, divisive, provocative aggression into shared mateship. The further political point is that it is too late. Arvie dies before he can return to work and appreciate this new mateship with Bill, this first experience of class solidarity. The Queensland shearers had been defeated in their strike by non-union working class labour recruited from the huge pool of unemployed. The lack of solidarity amidst the exploited, divided amongst themselves, led to a larger class defeat. When the Australian Workers Union risked strike action in 1894 in NSW, it was defeated.

Simultaneously with these stories of urban working conditions, Lawson was publishing his stories of conditions outside the towns. These were not seen as separate concerns, though Lawson is generally presented as

30 *Ibid.*, pp.125-6.

a writer of up-country and outback materials. Arvie Aspinall had grown up in the bush. The Job-like succession of disasters that fall on Tom Hopkins in 'Settling on the Land' fall on someone who 'did very well at his trade in the city, years ago, until he began to think that he could do better up-country.'<sup>31</sup> Lawson is concerned to stress the parallelism of hardships on the land and in the cities, not to encourage an irrelevant 'Sydney or the Bush' choice. In this he was in accord with William Lane's socialist strategy in *The Workingman's Paradise* where Ned, the shearer, is taken round the slums and recognizes the parallels.

If he could have persuaded himself that the bush had none of this, it would have been different. But he could not. The stench of the stifling shearing-sheds and the crowded sleeping huts where men are packed in rows like trucked sheep came to him with the sickening smell of the slums.<sup>32</sup>

In the factitious verse debate Lawson arranged with 'The Banjo', A. B. Paterson, in the *Bulletin* in 1892 on the comparative virtues of the city or the bush, Lawson is concerned to point to the shared oppressions:

For we noticed that the faces of the folks we chanced to meet  
Should have made a greater contrast to the faces in the street

he writes of the bush.<sup>33</sup> He uses the occasion to insert this radical political note, to remind the reader of the class exploitation in the bush, to see the bush in political terms, not merely topographically or falsely Arcadian. The Queensland shearers' strike of the previous year is recalled

Ah! we read about the drovers and the shearers and the like  
Till we wonder why such happy and romantic fellows strike.<sup>34</sup>

'A Day on a Selection' (*Bulletin*, 28 May 1892) is an endearing

31 *While the Billy Boils*, p.7.

32 'John Miller' (William Lane), *The Workingman's Paradise: An Australian Labour Novel* (1892), facsimile reprint, Sydney, 1980, p.44.

33 CV, 1, p.212.

34 CV, 1, p.214.

and enduring account of a selection, a small farm in the process of disintegration. The selector spends the day talking to his neighbour, asserting a mateship of idleness instead of the individualist hard work drive that theoretically should make the selection thrive. And the sketch ends with the splendid dinner table discussion of Henry George, Edward Bellamy and Ignatius Donnelly, in which nothing gets said because of the constant interruptions by the fowls and children.

The story has provoked various responses. A. A. Phillips offers a characteristic nationalist reading:

Lawson's estimate of the bushmen is not entirely, and therefore unconvincingly, eulogistic. Like most men of strong patriotic feeling, he can attack sharply where he finds weaknesses which threaten his people. Although he had an affection for the bushmen's casualness he turns acridly critical when he finds the casualness degenerating into sluggishness of mind. In 'A Day on a Selection', for example, he assails the squalor of an Australian smallholding, arising from the indifferent ignorance of this owner. It is true that this selector is an Englishman, but Lawson is obviously suggesting that the conditions which he is here painting are characteristic of the country. Indeed, there is little point in the sketch unless it is intended to criticize a national weakness.<sup>35</sup>

But there is a lot more to 'A Day on a Selection' than to 'criticize a national weakness'. The issues focussed here are complex and political; they show the tensions and contradictions and exploitations within the 'national'. In 1892 there was still no Australian 'nation'—federation came in 1901. The interest is in class situation, international capitalism, international workers' movements. The very references in the concluding discussion to the French Revolution and to the contemporary works of social change by the American writers Henry George (*Progress and Poverty*, 1879), Edward Bellamy (*Looking Backward*, 1887) and Ignatius Donnelly (*Caesar's Column*, 1889) proclaim an internationalist context.

35 A. A. Phillips, *Henry Lawson*, New York, 1970, p.70. G. A. Wilkes' reading is similar: ' "A Day on A Selection" offers an indictment of the shiftless selector which its humour does little to palliate.' Wilkes, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn: Literary Evidence for Australia's Cultural Development*, Melbourne, 1981, pp.47–48.

Of course, there is irony, but irony does not cancel the signification, only resituate it. It is not accidental or incidental that Lawson spells out his selector's nationality in the opening sentence: 'The scene is a small New South Wales Western selection, the holder whereof is native-English. His wife is native-Irish.'<sup>36</sup> It is not unrelated that Lawson's father was a Norwegian migrant and his mother's father was an English migrant.

But it is not only that the migrant selector is representative of Australian social reality: to leave it at that is simply to give a slightly more inclusive vision of the nation. The other point, of course, is the alienation of migrants—cut off from their home, their native environment, and unconnected with the Australian soil. There is no relationship with the land because these migrants are already alienated figures, often alienated from the land in Europe, certainly alienated from its unfamiliar nature in Australia. And this is all part of an international vision of social alienation: it is this situation that Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) confronted.

In the autobiography he began but never published, Lawson spelled out the socio-economic context of his parent's selection:

Our land was about the poorest round there, where selectors were shoved back amongst barren, stony ridges because of old land grants, or because the good land was needed to carry sheep. Our selection, about three hundred acres, lay round a little rocky, stony, scrubby, useless ridge, fronting the main road; the soil of the narrow sidings, that were not too steep for the plough, was grey and poor; and the gullies were full of waste heaps of clay from the diggers' holes. It was hopeless—only a lifetime of incessant bullocking might have made a farm of the place.<sup>37</sup>

And again in "Pursuing Literature" in Australia' he wrote:

In the first fifteen years of my life I saw the last of the Roaring Days on Gulgong goldfield, New South Wales. I remember the rush as a boy might his first and only pantomime. "On *our*

<sup>36</sup> *While the Billy Boils*, p.57.

<sup>37</sup> *CP*, 2, p.185.

selection” I tailed cows amongst the deserted shafts in the gullies of a dreary old field that was abandoned ere Gulgong “broke out”. I grubbed, ring-barked, and ploughed in the scratchy sort of way common to many “native-born” selectors round here; helped fight pleuro and drought; and worked on building contracts with “Dad”, who was a carpenter. Saw selectors slaving their lives away in dusty holes amongst the barren ridges; saw one or two carried home, in the end, on a sheet of bark; the old men worked till they died. Saw how the gaunt selectors’ wives lived and toiled. Saw elder sons stoop-shouldered old men at 30. Noted, in dusty patches in the remains of the fence—the ultimate results of 10 years’, 15 years’, and 20 years’ hard, hopeless graft by strong men who died like broken-down bullocks further out. And all the years miles and miles of rich black soil flats and chocolate slopes lay idle, because of old-time grants, or because the country carried sheep—for the sake of an extra bale of wool and an unknown absentee. I watched old fossickers and farmers reading *Progress and Poverty* earnestly and arguing over it Sunday afternoons. And I wished that I could write.<sup>38</sup>

In this context it is hard to read the story as any simple attack on ‘the indifferent ignorance’ of the selector and ‘casualness degenerating into sluggishness of mind’. Rather, if there is degeneration, we should find it in the social conditions that treat sheep as more important than men—a complaint against capitalism that goes back to Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516): ‘Your sheep ... eat up and swallow down the very men themselves’.<sup>39</sup> Shiftless and hopeless the selectors may seem, but what other choice is there? Bourgeois aspiration (an organised spick and span farm) or socialist aspiration (Bellamy) are equally distant from the selectors’ reality. So that what can be seen as a critique can be resituated as a sympathetic portrayal of it all being too much, of everything slipping, collapsing: as indeed things socially and economically were. T. A. Coghlan’s *Wealth and Progress of New South Wales*

38 *CP*, 2, p.109.

39 Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. J. H. Lupton, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1895. (Ralph Robynson translation, 1551). On recurrent uses of the concept after More, see Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough: The Representation of Agrarian England, 1500–1660*, Cambridge, 1996, pp.10, 43, 66, 77, 87.



revealed that while 212,639 selections were sold in New South Wales over 12 years, 1876-88, individual holdings of one acre and upwards had increased only from 39,639 to 46,142. In 1889, 580 persons held 25 million acres comprising 53 per cent of the alienated land of New South Wales. These facts caused the early Australian interest in progressive land taxation.<sup>40</sup>

The mentions of Henry George are not out of place.

The militancy of 'The Army of the Rear' and 'Faces in the Street' has been succeeded by the experience and expression of exploitation and defeat. The cooperation of unionism, the heightened consciousness of union discussions raised by ideological awareness of repressive techniques and utopian possibilities has fallen apart in 'A Day on a Selection' into the discussion in which nothing is said, in which work, practice, is disastrously separated from theory. The work isn't done, the cows escape as the selector and his neighbour talk. The theory never gets beyond sad tokens, the gestures towards sloganizing as the titles and authors are cited, but the slogans never deliver a meaning; the titles are announced but the contents of the books are never expounded. This is not only the run-down defeat of the sinking small selectors, who from a union point of view represent a petty-bourgeois, selfish, competitive individualism resistant to union cooperation. In this regard Lawson's sketch retains a vanguard militancy, the absent shearers the true socialists, while the selectors are the unorganised riff-raff. But it can also be interpreted as expressing the situation of the defeated socialists after the strike defeats: titles are mentioned and nothing else because it is all now inexpressible. The repression of the 1890s has begun and the days of innocently expounding communism and socialism are over. Even to cite the titles is provocative enough. But as long as nothing is said, as long as no politics are expounded, it can be done.

Colin Roderick has noted of 'A Day on a Selection' that 'the *Bulletin* printing of this story carried the sub-title "A Sketch from Observation", and the selection is obviously modelled on that of Lawson's father'.<sup>41</sup> Not only the material circumstances of the selection are observed,

40 Cited in L. G. Churchward, 'The American Influence on the Australian Labor Movement', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand* 5 (1952): 263-4.

41 Roderick, *Commentaries*, p.21.

but also the intellectual context; both are sketched from Lawson's own lived experience. I have indicated an internationalist aspect to the invocations of *Looking Backward*, *Progress and Poverty* and *Caesar's Column*. There was simultaneously a specific, contemporary, Australian application. The three titles were amongst a core of socialist and progressive books available from the *Worker* book fund from November 1890 to March 1892. There were twenty-five titles available altogether, but these three were amongst the most popular and representative. These were, indeed, the titles that were discussed. Moreover, William Lane had initiated a Bellamy society in Brisbane and had serialised *Looking Backward* in the *Worker* through 1890. *Progress and Poverty* had been serialised in the Sydney press in 1879, and Henry George made a lecture tour of Australia in 1890. Lawson referred to 'songs of mine in Henry George's *Standard* and other leading Yankee papers' in 1890.<sup>42</sup>

In its silences and ambiguities 'A Day on a Selection' can be read in multiple ways. The stasis, the futile stand-off situation with escaping cattle ranged against Henry George, expresses the desolate paralysis of the radical movement. The socialist reader can find a correlative for the sense of defeat, of block, of impotence. At the same time another reading is possible: a presentation of impractical, incompetent theoreticians who cannot succeed at the basic level of farming work. The images, the slogans, the situation are loaded with the political, explosive with meaning.

'The Drover's Wife' (*Bulletin*, 23 July 1892) offers another vision of selection life and a tribute to the courage and resilience of the women in the bush. It tells simply of a woman's vigil to protect her children when a snake gets under the house. She waits all night, and past events

42 On the *Worker* book fund, see Michael Wilding, 'William Lane and the *Worker* Book Fund: "Progressive Books at Cost"', *Southerly* 41 (1981): 329-34. On George's influence in Australia, see Michael Wilding, Introduction to *The Workingman's Paradise* (1980), pp.26-9, 36-8; Churchward, *op. cit.* n.40 *supra*; and Bruce Scates, "'Millenium or Pandemonium?": Radicalism in the Labour Movement, Sydney, 1889-1899', *Labour History* 50 (May 1986): 72-94. For Lawson's songs, see *Henry Lawson: Letters 1890-1922*, ed. Colin Roderick, Sydney, 1970, p.47.

are recalled, flood and fire, giving the story a mythic dimension. Out of these recurrent experiences of pioneering life Lawson extracts the representative. In part the snake and woman confrontation is of course Edenic, an Australian Genesis, which is why the story has had such a powerful impact. But the Edenic is itself a political myth. 'When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?' When the snake has been killed the dog 'shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind'<sup>43</sup>—the curse of labour, and suffering in childbirth. Henry Kingsley's phrase that Australia was a 'workingman's paradise' provides the social specificity for the archetypal reference. Lane's novel re-examines *The Workingman's Paradise* from a socialist perspective. Lawson is doing the same in brief.

The situation the woman is in is quite specifically established. She is alone because her husband is away working: the economic cause underlying the break up of the family, the enforced nature of the separation, is spelled out. The husband is also set in a precise social category. He is an ex-squatter. The squatter who has lost his land, either to the banks or through alcohol or both, is a recurrent figure in Lawson's work—'Middleton's Rouseabout', and 'Telling Mrs Baker' are characteristic. The situation is clearly related to current social reality. The archetypal quality of Lawson's work comes from its precise observation of social class particularity. It is not a mystifying, unplaced, never-never land pastoral with figures unlocated in history or class that Lawson creates.

Lawson like Lane was concerned with class cooperation. Socialist propaganda required getting the middle classes sympathetic to the rights of labour, and showing them they too were vulnerable to the destructive effects of capitalism. Consistently in his work Lawson tries to break down divisions: to show the parallels of city and country working class life; to show the destructive effects of the system on the working and middle classes. 'The Big Brassingtons came down in the world and drifted to the city, as many smaller people do, more and more every year', he writes in 'The House That Was Never Built.'<sup>44</sup> In the background is the process remarked in the *Communist Manifesto*: 'the

43 *While the Billy Boils*, p.138.

44 Henry Lawson, *Children of the Bush*, Sydney, 1910, p.167.

lower strata of the middle class ... sink gradually into the proletariat...'<sup>45</sup>

A recognition of the situation of women and a concerted effort to press for women's rights was part of the developing socialist consciousness of the union movement. The isolation, the loneliness, the hardship are succinctly evoked. Here is the drover's true mate, his marriage mate, his wife, separated from him by the work situation. At the same time another sexual politics emerges, and the woman's clubbing the snake to death suggests a revenge on the phallic, a refusal of the procreative. The dryness of the outback has dried out the sexuality of its struggling pioneers and left only resentment, resentment at being brought to and left in such an isolated place. The eldest child, who tries to get out of bed when the snake is killed 'but his mother forces him back with a grip of iron', offers an Oedipal conclusion to the story:

'Mother, I won't never go drovin': blast me if I do.'

And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush.<sup>46</sup>

With its absent drover, 'The Drover's Wife' poignantly presents the broken family, 'the practical absence of the family among the proletarians' as the *Communist Manifesto* puts it;<sup>47</sup> the drought, as well as a naturalistic portrayal of conditions, also represents the drought of sexual absence; and this in turn issues in the destruction of the masculine, the killing of the snake and burning it.

'The Drover's Wife' is saturated with the political. The implicit allusion to the slogan of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the illustration of the process of the destruction of the family described in the *Communist Manifesto* arise naturally from the highly politicized context in which Lawson was writing. The slogan of a radical Eden—'When Adam delved and Eve span. Who was then the gentleman?' had remained in currency

45 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, translated by Samuel Moore (1888), Moscow, 1973, p.53.

46 *While the Billy Boils*, p.138. Xavier Pons offers the fullest psychoanalytical approach to Lawson in *Henry Lawson: 'l'homme et l'œuvre*, Paris, 1980, and *Out of Eden: Henry Lawson's Life and Works—A Psychoanalytical View*, Sydney, 1984.

47 *Manifesto*, p.68.

for 500 years; it was part of the revolutionary tradition that the socialists and unionists of the 1890s were able to draw upon, a vision of primal egalitarianism, before the development of class society.<sup>48</sup> The *Communist Manifesto* was serialized in the *Brisbane Worker* in 1893 and reprinted in the same year as a pamphlet. Every fictional situation was likely to have its iconic significance and political interpretation. 'The Drover's Wife' shows isolation, not co-operation. The loneliness of bush life has been remarked by commentator after commentator. But the point of the loneliness that Lawson recurrently presents is its economic base. The itinerant bush worker and the small selector are in a hopeless situation, with none of the social back-up of established peasant societies. The big pastoralists control the profitable land. The Queensland unions have been crushed, and though the New South Wales unions had for the moment staved off confrontation, they were to be defeated in the big strike of 1894. In this story of absences, one of the significant absences is that of co-operative action, of unionism. At the same time it is not a totally bleak vision. The story ends with the coming of dawn. A weak, 'sickly' dawn, but still an assertion of renewal and hope. That positive note, basic to a socialist vision, programmatic for socialist realism, is firmly there.

Edward Garnett wrote:

If this artless sketch be taken as the summary of a woman's life, giving its significance in ten short pages, Maupassant has never done better. Lawson has re-treated this subject at length in the more detailed picture in 'Water them Geraniums'; I leave it to mothers of all ranks and stations in life to say how it affects them, and whether it has not universal application to the life of working women wherever the sun goes down. Art stands for much, but sincerity also stands for much in art, and the sincerity of Lawson's tales nearly always drives them home.<sup>49</sup>

48 See Albert B. Friedman, ' "When Adam Delved ...": Contexts of an Historic Proverb', in *The Learned and the Lewd: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson, Cambridge, Mass., 1974, pp.213–30; and Christopher Hill, 'From Lollards to Levellers' in *The Collected Essays of Christopher Hill, Volume Two*, Brighton, 1986, p.100.

49 *Friday Nights*, p.184.

Garnett was well aware that the artlessness was in itself the mark of Lawson's art. He hedges his bets on how great art it is, or nearly is, yet recognizes the genius in this work that was so unlike the English norm. In the same way Garnett encouraged those other outsider, marginal figures—Joseph Conrad, W. H. Hudson, and D. H. Lawrence.

Read 'The Union Buries its Dead' ... if you care to see how the most casual, 'newspapery' and apparently artless art of this Australian writer carries with it a truer, finer, more delicate commentary on life than all the idealistic works of any of our genteel school of writers. It isn't great art, but it is near to great art; and, moreover, great art is not to be found every 'publishing session.'<sup>50</sup>

'The Union Buries its Dead' (*Truth*, 16 April 1893) is another classic picture of bad times in the bush. It opens with a delicate suggestion of Maupassant, and then the Seine of those Parisian Sunday afternoon boating stories is quickly redefined as a billabong:

While out boating one Sunday afternoon on a billabong across the river, we saw a young man on horseback driving some horses along the bank. He said it was a fine day, and asked if the water was deep there. The joker of our party said it was deep enough to drown him, and he laughed and rode further up. We didn't take much notice of him.

Next day a funeral gathered at a corner pub and they asked each other in to have a drink while waiting for the hearse. They passed away some of the time dancing jigs to a piano in the bar parlour. They passed away the rest of the time sky-larking and fighting.

The defunct was a young union labourer, about twenty-five, who had been drowned the previous day while trying to swim horses across a billabong of the Darling.<sup>51</sup>

Manning Clark captures the tone of the story: 'he was telling Australians

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.183.

<sup>51</sup> *While the Billy Boils*, p.91.

that the bush barbarians had their own way of showing they know just as well as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes what life was all about.<sup>52</sup>

The story has a more specific socialist purpose than this, however.

He was almost a stranger in town, and the fact of his having been a union man accounted for the funeral. The police found some union papers in his swag, and called at the General Labourers' Union Office for information about him. That's how we knew.<sup>53</sup>

The unionism is part of the subject. The General Labourers' Union (GLU) of Australia had been established two years earlier in February 1891. The Australian Shearers' Union (ASU) had organised the New South Wales shearers, the GLU 'took up the work of organizing the woolshed labourers'.<sup>54</sup> W. G. Spence, who was president of the ASU, was secretary. It was a radical innovative union. Spence recalled:

A great deal of work was done by the GLU. It made experiments in the shape of carrying out road work and sewerage contracts under co-operation, the Union finding the deposit, plant, etc., and the men dividing the result of their labour. The Union also engaged Mrs Summerfeld to organize the women workers.<sup>55</sup>

The progressive socialist position was to create one big union of an alliance of all working people. But class society permeated the working classes as well as the middle classes. The distinctions between skilled labour and unskilled labour persisted, not only in pay differentials but also in status and union organisation. Although it was proposed to amalgamate the Australian Shearers' Union with the General Labourers' Union in 1892 and again in 1893, a majority of the shearers voted against

52 Clark, *Henry Lawson*, p.78.

53 *While the Billy Boils*, p.91.

54 W. G. Spence, *History of the A.W.U.*, Sydney, 1911, p.47. Other readings, however, downplay the union theme. 'The whole of "The Union Buries Its Dead", as we now see, is probably less in praise of union solidarity than in recognition of that state of spiritual paralysis which its author could project so tellingly upon his characters because (we must believe) he knew it so well himself.' Harry Heseltine, *The Uncertain Self: Essays in Australian Literature and Criticism*, Melbourne, 1986, p.45.

55 W. G. Spence, pp.47-8.

the proposal. In 1892, 5862 were for, 5997 against; in 1893, 4825 were for, 5686 against. However, the NSW branches gave a majority of 576 in favour, and the NSW branches were allowed to amalgamate. 'Practically amalgamation was agreed to at the Conference of 1894, but the new constitution was only adopted at the special convention held in Albury in February, 1895.'<sup>56</sup> The amalgamated organisation was called the Australian Workers' Union (AWU). In 1904, the Queensland and NSW AWUs amalgamated.

These class divisions within the working classes are part of Lawson's story:

The procession numbered fifteen, fourteen souls following the broken shell of a soul. Perhaps not one of the fourteen possessed a soul any more than the corpse did—but that doesn't matter.

Four or five of the funeral, who were boarders at the pub, borrowed a trap which the landlord used to carry passengers to and from the railway station. They were strangers to the corpse.

A horseman, who looked like a drover just returned from a big trip, dropped into our dusty wake and followed us a few hundred yards, dragging his pack-horse behind him, but a friend made wild and demonstrative signals from a hotel verandah—jabbing his left thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the bar—so the drover hauled off and didn't catch up to us any more. He was a stranger to the entire show.<sup>57</sup>

The separations between those on horseback and those on foot are class separations. 'A barrier which became equally marked was the one separating those who worked on horseback from those who did not', G. A. Wilkes has noted, and he offers representative evidence from the literature.<sup>58</sup> The horseman does not have solidarity with the labourer on foot. A sympathy, yes, but the mateship of alcohol draws him off. Similarly, the shearers pay their alcoholic respects to the procession but do not join in.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

<sup>57</sup> *While the Billy Boils*, p.92.

<sup>58</sup> Wilkes, *op. cit.*, pp.43–44. 'There is not a horse in the book from title page to imprint—not one horse!' David Ferguson (1896) in Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism*, p.48.



On the way to the cemetery we passed three shearers sitting on the shady side of a fence. One was drunk—very drunk. The other two covered their right ears with their hats, out of respect for the departed—whoever he might have been—and one of them kicked the drunk and muttered something to him.<sup>59</sup>

What Lawson represents are the class divisions within the working classes; at the same time the solidarity of the labourers is stressed in their attending the funeral of the unknown man. So we have Lawson's characteristic bitter-sweet plangency, a celebration of the impulse towards solidarity, and a notation of the forces opposed to it.

The divisions between labour had been considerably broken down, but progress still had to be made before the horseman would continue to the funeral and the shearers get off the fence and join in with the rouseabouts. Lawson remarked on the sense of superiority of the shearers that underlay the class divisions between shearers and labourers in 'A Word in Season' in the *Worker* (Sydney) in 1894:

Get rid of the idea that the shearers are the only wronged men on earth and the squatters 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.

Remember that the fathers, the heroes of modern Liberty, fought and threw away their lives on barricades in the streets of cities.<sup>60</sup>

The opening of Bret Harte's 'Tennessee's Partner'—'I do not think that we ever knew his real name'<sup>61</sup>—and the disquisition on the names people went by is taken up by Lawson and rewritten with political implication. Apart from being the representative unknown outback worker, the dead man's anonymity carries suggestions of the necessarily pseudonymous

<sup>59</sup> *While the Billy Boils*, p.93.

<sup>60</sup> *CP*, 2, p.28.

<sup>61</sup> Bret Harte, *The Luck of Roaring Camp* (1870).

nature of early radical activity. The Queensland shearers' strikes had meant that many union activists had changed their names to avoid arrest or to gain re-employment. Mitchell remarks in 'The Man Who Forgot', 'and as for a name, that's nothing. I don't know mine, and I've had eight.'<sup>62</sup> William Lane edited the *Worker* and wrote *The Workingman's Paradise* under a pseudonym, John Miller. Lawson regularly used the names 'Joe Swallow,' 'Cervus Wright,' and 'Jack Cornstalk' to sign political pieces. Larry Petrie, the Scots born secretary of the General Labourer's Union had been christened George Frederick Augustus Howard Carlyle Petrie, he said, and as G. F. Howard he booked a passage on a non-union crewed ship and was arrested for causing an explosion aboard, in July 1893.<sup>63</sup>

The name the dead man went by—Jim Tyson—has a deeply sardonic implication. James Tyson (1819-98) was one of the largest landholders in Australia. His name was constantly in the Brisbane *Worker*. 'By 1898 Tyson owned about twenty stations in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, amounting to about five million acres including 350,000 acres freehold.'<sup>64</sup> Tyson was notorious for his meanness and 'Banjo' Paterson recalled 'When he had become a very rich man, he could never get over the old bush habits.... He used to travel with a packhorse and sometimes when he was going across country he would camp for the night with a lot of drovers, but he would never tell them who he was'.<sup>65</sup> But this is no incognito Tyson, as the dead man's age makes clear. This is his anti-type, the union labourer who owned nothing. And even when his real name is discovered, it is forgotten by the narrator and never given to us.

In July 1893 the first 220 members of the New Australia Co-operative Settlement Association under the chairmanship of William Lane sailed

62 *While the Billy Boils*, p.34.

63 Lawson quotes the ballad Mary Cameron wrote on Petrie in 'A Hero in Dingo Scrubs'; see Roderick, *Commentaries*, pp.206-9. Petrie later went to Lane's Paraguayan settlements: see Gavin Souter, *A Peculiar People: The Australians in Paraguay*, Sydney, 1968, pp.170-1, and E. H. Lane, *Dawn to Dusk*.

64 Geoffrey Dutton, *The Squatters*, South Yarra, 1985, p.112. Tyson's cattle are referred to in 'Going Blind' in *While the Billy Boils*, p.72. Adrian Mitchell remarks on the 'dead pan joke' of the name in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. Leonie Kramer, Melbourne, 1981, p.72.

65 Dutton, p.115.

for Paraguay. Lawson wrote a poem in support, 'Something Better'.<sup>66</sup> But the movement was seen by many as a further weakening of socialism within Australia. A second batch sailed in December, but by then the first group had already been split and the movement destabilized. Lawson stood in as editor of the *Sydney Worker*, hoping to be given the permanent position, but someone else was appointed, and he went to New Zealand looking for work. The voyage steerage issued in the poem 'For'ard', published in the *New Zealand Mail*, the *Sydney Worker*, and Keir Hardie's *Labour Leader*.<sup>67</sup> On the offer of a position on the new *Daily Worker* Lawson returned to Sydney, only to find the paper had collapsed. The unions were once again under attack from the pastoralists in the attempt to cut wages and the consequent strikes and violence of 1894. At this period, Lawson seems to have been close to Mary Cameron (later Mary Gilmore), who was living in a boarding house kept by William Lane's wife, Annie, preparatory to joining Lane's Colonia Cosme, the second communist settlement in Paraguay. The other radical centre Lawson frequented was McNamara's bookshop in Sydney, a library and centre for international radical journals and discussions. In 1896, with his first book of poems *In The Days When the World was Wide* published, he married McNamara's step-daughter, Bertha.<sup>68</sup>

This radical world had been Lawson's milieu for ten years. But now radicalism was in retreat; the unions had been badly defeated, membership dropped disastrously. Collecting his contributions from the papers of those years for book publication, he had to endure considerable sub-editorial emendations. The texts collected in his books often lack the political specificity of the original magazine publications. Lawson's first collection of stories, *While the Billy Boils* (1896) received English distribution and the *Times* found it 'a little in Bret Harte's

66 *New Australia*, (24 March 1894); CV, 1, 256–7. On New Australia, see Lloyd Ross, *William Lane and the Australian Labor Movement*, Sydney, 1937; Gavin Souter, *A Peculiar People*; Michael Wilding, *The Paraguayan Experiment*, Melbourne, 1985; and Don Gobbett and Malcolm Saunders, *With Lane in Paraguay: Harry Taylor of 'The Murray Pioneer 1873–1932*, Rockhampton, 1995.

67 Anne Cranny-Francis, 'Henry Lawson and the *Labour Leader*', *Australian Literary Studies* 11 (1983): 266.

68 The standard biographies are Denton Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer*, Adelaide, 1963 and Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, Sydney, 1991.

manner, crossed, perhaps, with that of Guy de Maupassant'.<sup>69</sup> His second collection, *On the Track and Over the Sliprails* (1900) was similarly well received. Francis Thompson wrote in the *Daily Chronicle* that it 'will well sustain the reputation its author has already won as the best writer of Australian short stories and sketches the literary world knows'.<sup>70</sup> Encouraged by his reception, Lawson went to London in 1900. Blackwoods published a selection from the two previous prose volumes, *The Country I Come From* (1900) and between November 1900 and October 1901 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* published some half dozen of Lawson's stories from his new collection *Joe Wilson and His Mates* which Blackwood published in 1901.<sup>71</sup> Methuen published a further collection *Children of the Bush* (1902). Lawson returned to Sydney in 1902 but his work was remembered. Will H. Ogilvie wrote of him in the *Scotsman*, 2 May 1914:

He became a confirmed Socialist in his early manhood, setting a high value on the brotherhood of man, and seeing nothing but virtue in the attitude of Trade Unionism in its long war against capital. Against the blue sky of the infinite Bush spaces fluttered for him for ever the red flag of Revolt. The gipsy in his nature, and his deep-rooted and romantic sense of fair play, made him a ready convert to the camaraderie of the river roads; and his talent for verse-writing made him the accepted and much-loved spokesman of the brotherhood.<sup>72</sup>

The opening story of *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, 'Joe Wilson's Courtship', starts off with an attempt at a happy note. 'There are many happy times in this world when a healthy boy is happy.'<sup>73</sup> But within pages the note of despair, hidden sadness, unspecified misery is

69 Quoted in advertisements in Angus & Robertson publications: e.g. Henry Lawson, *When I Was King*, Sydney, 1905, appendix of announcements of other books, p.5, though not cited in Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism*.

70 Francis Thompson, *Daily Chronicle* (London), (29 March 1901), reprinted in Colin Roderick, ed. *Henry Lawson Criticism*, p.108.

71 John Barnes, 'Henry Lawson in London', *Quadrant* (July, 1979): 22-35, and 'Henry Lawson in England: the "High Tide": A Revaluation', *Quadrant* (June 1984): 28-43.

72 *Henry Lawson Criticism*, p.163.

73 Henry Lawson, *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, Sydney, 1902, p.3.

introduced: 'and if I had no more regret in married life than I have in my courting days, I wouldn't walk to and fro in the room, or up and down the yard in the dark sometimes, or lie awake some nights thinking.... Ah well!'<sup>74</sup> And again we have the characteristic bitter-sweet Lawson note. The attempt to launch on a literary career in London was part of Lawson's attempt to take remedial action and halt his descent into the vortex of depression and alcoholism. The political movement to which he had committed himself and which had provided the rationale and aesthetic of his work was in disarray. So that attempt at positive thinking, launching off on the next stage of a literary career, was one shrouded in the context of pervasive pessimism. Turning from the political to the private he had only his increasingly unhappy marriage, and the memory of his parents' stormy and unhappy marriage to confront. The four long stories about Joe Wilson and his wife Mary, an archetypal (Joseph and Mary) pair of young settlers, show the destructive effects of economic hardship and the struggles of the life of the small selector in the bush on marital relationships. The theme is there not only in Joe and Mary's marriage, but reinforced in the lives of the few neighbours. Far longer than those early *Bulletin* sketches, these stories purport to a fully fledged realism of recorded detail, rather than that earlier allusive impressionism. 'Water them Geraniums' opens with an inventory of Joe Wilson's furniture and possessions. But this realism is something of an illusion. Just as Lawson had produced material acceptable to the *Bulletin's* rigid preconceptions—short, boiled down, spare—now he could simulate the more discursive mode of mainstream British magazine realism. Much of the force of these stories, however, lies in their margins. The effects are as oblique as ever. The glancing, the tangential, the implied, the allusive, are the tactics Lawson uses to capture his material. The ostensible direction or mode of the story is not the 'point': rather it is a strategy employed by Lawson in order to slip in the unacceptable—the material the editors and publishers would

74 *Ibid.*, p.6. Adrian Mitchell in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, ed. Leonie Kramer, remarks on the 'poignancy' (p.72). 'This sequence of stories is the height of his accomplishment. Joe Wilson, chronicling his own history, acknowledging his many doubts and misgivings, and not seeking to excuse himself, is the most completely realized of his many bush studies. In these stories, Lawson set new standards for imaginative realism in Australian fiction.' (pp.73–74).

refuse if they thought that was the central concern. The innocence of Joe and Mary is a way of introducing the sexual threats that could not be written about in a direct way, at a time of repressive censorship of sexual materials in the printed word. The story tells of Joe's slow, bashful courting. There is a delicate, idyllic episode where Joe helps Mary hang out clothes, a celebration of ordinary, daily activity at that time not ordinarily experienced by those who could afford servants. (By the time Lawson was writing these stories in England, he and his wife had a servant; and he was causing considerable class confusion in the village by wanting to carry his purchases home from the shop himself, as he tells in the third of his 'Letters to Jack Cornstalk').<sup>75</sup>

I took the line from Mary, and accidentally touched her soft, plump little hand as I did so: it sent a thrill right through me.<sup>76</sup>

The idyll turns into embarrassment as Mary shoos Joe away so she can hang up unnamed things he is not allowed to see. The sexual implications in the sheet hanging are now drawn attention to; not exactly made explicit because they are unmentionable. But the unmentionable exerts its strong force of absence, appropriate for Joe's unfulfilled, inexpressible sexual yearning. Later, Joe's 'handkerchiefs and collars disappeared from the room and turned up washed and ironed and laid tidily on my table' and, 'I felt so full of hope and joy'. Then Jack tells him 'I see you've made a new mash, Joe. I saw the half-caste cook tidying up your room this morning and taking your collars and things to the wash house.'<sup>77</sup> Not only is there the simple humour of love's delusions, there is also the racial categorizing which again marks an unbridgeable gulf for Joe. All the racist complex of attitudes are brought into play here. The issues are also class issues. Mary, as Jack describes her early on, is

a nice little girl in service at Black's.... She's more like an adopted daughter, in fact, than a servant. She's a real good little girl, and good-looking into the bargain. I hear that young Black is

75 Henry Lawson, *Triangles of Life*, Melbourne, 1913, pp.136-7.

76 *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, pp.17-18.

77 *Ibid.*, p.25.

sweet on her, but they say she won't have anything to do with him.<sup>78</sup>

She is described in terms that make her appear of marginal working class status. Though 'in service' she is treated like a daughter. The station owner's son could be just wanting sexual diversion, or it could be marriage; it is left unclear. Joe's relationship with Mary would be upward mobile; with the half-caste cook, unnamed, downward mobile. Racial and national and class characteristics are recurrently indicated in this story. Mary's father had

been an old mate of Black's, a younger son of a well-to-do English family (with blue blood in it, I believe) and sent out to Australia with a thousand pounds to make his way.... They think they're hard done by ... I wish I'd had a thousand pounds to start on! Mary's mother was the daughter of a German immigrant.<sup>79</sup>

All these issues of sexuality and race and class are brought into play in the fight Joe has with the Romany. The Romany, the gipsy, presents the classic sexual threat to the Anglo-Celtic:

he was a big shearer, a dark, handsome fellow, who looked like a gipsy: it was reckoned that there was foreign blood in him. He went by the name of Romany. He was supposed to be shook after Mary too. He had the nastiest temper and the best violin in the district.<sup>80</sup>

Romany is the alter ego of Joe Wilson-Henry Lawson. Joe's 'I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake'<sup>81</sup> incites identification of Lawson with Joe, but he is no less to be identified with Romany. Lawson continually recurred to his foreign blood, to his Norwegian father and his gipsy grandfather. The innocent naive bush poet Joe fights himself in fighting

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.262. Lawson's wife, Bertha Marie Louise Bredt, was the daughter of two German immigrants. And, Lawson wrote in 1913, 'Remember I was brought up in a German district', (*CP*, 2, p.227).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

the sexual, gipsy, bohemian violinist Romany; Romany represents that sexual, decadent, bohemian milieu Lawson was trying, maybe not wholeheartedly, to escape.

The Romany has been unseated from his horse in the dark by the clothes line Joe has strung up, doing his own washing. It is not this that provokes the fight, however, but Romany's dismissive attitude to Mary. 'I've heard a tom-cat sing better' brings in a taunt of sexuality, the promiscuity of the tom-cat allied with the insult in the gender shift; a gender shift enacted in Joe's feminisation in, like most of the single itinerant workers, doing his own washing; the final insult is Romany's statement, 'She's setting her cap at that Jackaroo now. Some girls will run after anything with trousers on.'<sup>82</sup>

In fighting Romany, of course, Joe is displacing the aggression he feels for the jackaroo, who has turned up at Black's and is interested in Mary. The Romany's comment stirs up Joe's sexual anxiety about the jackaroo, but he cannot fight the jackaroo directly. The class divisions prevent it. As Chris Wallace-Crabbe notes, 'This Misfit is the man whom shy, sensitive Joe has to knock about.'<sup>83</sup>

Jack Mitchell has noted 'the almost universal appearance of the, in reality, highly untypical "love-triangle" involving a worker, a man from the ruling class, and a woman (from either class) in our pre-Tressell proletarian novel.'<sup>84</sup> The triangular situation proves unreal here—Mary is not in love with the jackaroo: but it is real enough as a fantasy situation to provoke Joe to a displaced hostility onto Romany. What Lawson shows is how an inexpressible aggression to the ruling class produces an expressed aggression to the scapegoat racial minority, the gipsy. This is no mere metaphor. The gipsies no less than the Jews were victims of the extermination camps, and continue to be harried and harassed in England and Europe today.

82 *Ibid.*, p.28. See Marilyn Lake, 'Socialism and Manhood: The Case of William Lane', *Labour History* 50 (May 1986): 54–62. See also the discussion between Lake and Bruce Scates cited in the essay on William Lane, *infra*, n.14.

83 Chris Wallace-Crabbe, *Melbourne or the Bush: Essays on Australian Literature and Society*, Melbourne, 1974, p.28.

84 Jack Mitchell, 'Aesthetic Problems of the Development of the Proletarian-Revolutionary Novel in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* (1963), reprinted in David Craig, ed. *Marxists on Literature*, Harmondsworth, 1975, pp.245–66.



Out of a simple, purportedly innocent, clean, positive love story, Lawson produces an oblique sexual-political-radical exploration. The displaced centre of the story is about displacement. Proclaimed themes are often suspect; the explicit proclamation invites the suspicious reader to seek other meanings, subtle, elliptical, oblique. The seemingly prolix manner of the Joe Wilson stories allow Lawson to pace these oblique insertions, revelations, intimations. Edward Garnett wrote:

I have never read anything in modern English literature that is so absolutely democratic in tone, so much the real thing, as 'Joe Wilson's Courtship'. And so with all Lawson's tales and sketches. [Tolstoy and Howells, and Whitman and Kipling, and Zola and Hauptmann and Gorky have all written descriptions of 'democratic' life; but none of these celebrated authors], not even Maupassant himself, has so absolutely taken us inside the life as do the tales 'Joe Wilson's Courtship' and 'A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek'. And it is this rare, convincing tone of this Australian writer that gives him a great value now, when forty-nine out of fifty Anglo-Saxon writers are insisting on *not* describing the class they were born in, but straining their necks and their outlooks in order to describe the life of the class which God has placed beyond them. Hence, the comparative decay and neglect of true realism, the realism of *Tom Jones*, and of *Emma*, of *Barchester Towers*, and of *Middlemarch*, [of much of *David Copperfield* and of *The Newcomes*].<sup>85</sup>

Lawson's attitudes to race are much more complex than the caricature of him as a racist and fascist in Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia*.<sup>86</sup> Australian society was racist at the turn of the century, like most Anglo-Celtic societies. To stress union racism and ignore establishment

85 *Academy and Literature* (8 March 1902), reprinted in Roderick, *Henry Lawson Criticism*, pp.123–4. When Garnett reissued the piece in *Friday Nights* (1922) he omitted the passages marked by square brackets. Emile Saillens compared Lawson to Gorki in *Mercure de France* (1 October 1910) (*Henry Lawson Criticism*, p.147).

86 Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning The Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism*, Ringwood, 1970, revised 1976, pp.104–16.

racism is to give a grossly distorted picture. Lane, Lawson and other socialists could see the racist politics being played—the introduction of ‘indentured’ kanaka labour in Queensland, the employment of non-unionized Chinese workers—in order to break the emergent union movement. Immigration has always been a major method used by the capitalists to force down wages by creating huge labour surpluses. The reactive, racist response to these economic manoeuvres is recorded in Lawson’s work. But to represent is not necessarily to endorse. What is remarkable is how he shows the nature of racism as displaced class antagonism in ‘Joe Wilson’s Courtship’.

In his next collection, *Children of the Bush* (1902) Lawson dramatizes the possibility of the transcendence of racism. The opening story, ‘Send Round the Hat’ describes the spontaneous charity, the organized co-operative mateship of ‘The Giraffe’, a 6’3” gangling bushman who is always making collections for the down and out.

Some years before, camels and Afghan drivers had been imported to the Bourke district; the camels did very well in the dry country, they went right across country and carried everything from sardines to flooring boards. And the teamsters loved the Afghans nearly as much as Sydney furniture makers love the cheap Chinese in the same line. They loved ’em even as union shearers on strike love blacklegs brought up-country to take their places.

Now the Giraffe was a good, straight unionist, but in cases of sickness or trouble he was as apt to forget his unionism, as all Bushmen are, at all times (and for all time), to forget their creed. So, one evening, the Giraffe blundered into the ‘Carrier’s Arms’—of all places in the world—when it was full of teamsters; he had his hat in his hand and some small silver and coppers in it.

‘I say you fellers, there’s a poor, sick Afghan in the camp down there along the—’

A big, brawny bullock driver took him firmly by the shoulders, or, rather by the elbows, and ran him out before any

87 *Children of the Bush*, pp.7–8. The Methuen edition of *Children of the Bush*, London, 1902, comprised 23 stories and 13 poems. The 1909 edition from Angus & Robertson, Sydney (the text cited here) contained only the prose, and the poems were included in *When I Was King and Other Verses*, Sydney, 1905.

damage was done. The Giraffe took it as he took most things, good-humouredly; but about dusk, he was seen slipping down towards the Afghan camp with a billy of soup.<sup>87</sup>

The socialist aspects of the *Joe Wilson* volume had been subdued and implicit. The years of writing for the radical press had ensured the development of Lawson's radical vision, whether political themes were explicitly proclaimed or not. The verses 'The Never-Never country' that conclude the volume, however, pay explicit tribute to 'Oh rebels to society!' and 'The communism perfected!'<sup>88</sup> In *Children of the Bush* the socialist and unionist is foregrounded. The *Athenaeum* commented:

one finds it right and natural that a strong democratic note should ring through these pages. But it is rather a pity that the note should be quite as insistent as it is, that it should be aggressive, and that, on occasion, it should sound bitter.<sup>89</sup>

Here Lawson collects stories about unionists, stories about the meaning of socialism. The Giraffe's taking round the hat for the ostracized and impoverished prostitutes is a definition of socialism in practice. In Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise* Nellie kisses a sleeping prostitute on a park bench and announces 'This is socialism'. Lane's younger brother Ernie recalled how Arthur Rae, a New South Wales labour politician and vice-president of the New Australia association, told Lane 'Nellie should have left half a crown in her hand—that would have been practical socialism'.<sup>90</sup> Lawson's story shows socialism in practice. The model of Christ and Mary Magdalene is in the background, of course. Lane's socialism had been part of a religious belief, and he blamed some of the failure of the New Australia co-operative settlement association in Paraguay on his not having stressed the religious aspect of it to recruits. Lawson shares his general orientation: Christian analogies gently permeate *Children of the Bush*. The 'bush missionary', unionist Peter Mclaughlan, preaches a sermon of reconciliation in 'Shall We Gather at the River' when the clergyman fails to arrive.

88 *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, p.333.

89 *The Athenaeum* 3907, (13 September 1902): 347.

90 E. H. Lane, *From Dawn to Dusk*, p.48.

'Lord Douglas' proclaims its political context with its opening:

The Imperial Hotel was rather an unfortunate name for an out-back town pub, for out-back is the stronghold of Australian democracy; it was the out-back vote and influence that brought about 'One Man One Vote', 'Payment of Members', and most of the democratic legislation of late years, and from out-back came the overwhelming vote in favour of Australian as against Imperial Federation.<sup>91</sup>

And the hotel is described in its place in out-back politics.

The Imperial Hotel was patronised by the Pastoralists, the civil servants, the bank manager and clerks—all the scrub aristocracy; it was the headquarters of the *Pastoralists' Union* in Bourke; a barracks for blacklegs brought up from Sydney to take the place of Union shearers on strike; and the new Governor, on his inevitable visit to Bourke, was banqueted at the Imperial Hotel. The editor of the local 'Capitalistic rag' stayed there; the Pastoralists' member was elected mostly by dark ways and means devised at the Imperial Hotel, and one of its managers had stood as a dummy candidate to split the Labour vote; the management of the hotel was his reward.<sup>92</sup>

The manager is representative of a recurrent type in Lawson—the immigrant with nothing known about his background. After his arrival in England Lawson developed his presentation of this type with a new sense of English class differentials. 'Jack Mitchell reckoned, by the way he treated his *employees* and spoke to workmen, that he was the educated son of an English farmer—gone wrong and sent out to Australia. Someone called him "Lord Douglas", and the nickname caught on.'<sup>93</sup>

The story details some of the confrontation between unionists and 'Lord Douglas' up until the manager disappears and is gaoled for embezzlement, but the focus is on his return from gaol, when some are

91 *Children of the Bush*, p.44.

92 *Ibid.*, p.45.

93 *Ibid.*, p.46.

in favour of boycotting him, kicking him out of town, tarring and feathering him. Mitchell, however, insists on passing round the hat to help the manager get back on his feet. And he is proved right; the final paragraph notes the ex-manager opened a shop 'and the *Sydney Worker, Truth* and *Bulletin* and other democratic rags are on sale at his shop'.<sup>94</sup> It is a straightforward parable of samaritan socialism, class collaboration. Though this bare outline of its conscious socialist content does not do justice to the subtlety, irony, comedy and self-awareness of the writing. It is not a naive fable. It concludes:

He is scarcely yet regarded as a straight-out democrat. He was a gentleman once, Mitchell said, and the old blood was not to be trusted. But, last elections, Douglas worked quietly for Unionism, and gave the leaders certain hints, and put them up to various electioneering dodges which enabled them to return, in the face of Monopoly, a Labour member who is as likely to go straight as long as any other Labour member.<sup>95</sup>

Lawson had gone outback to Bourke in September 1892, spending some ten months there, and making a two-hundred mile tramp to Hungerford. Nationalist commentators have tended to privilege this episode as 'the never-forgotten trip to north-west New South Wales which represented his sole experience of life outback'.<sup>96</sup> But the stress is more properly put on the continuity of Lawson's socialist education at Bourke, rather than on the unique 'brief', 'real' experience. The stress on Lawson the untutored, intuitive responder to life situations has served to deny his conscious socialist art. He certainly was that sensitive, intuitive, responsive writer, but the context of these intuitive responses, the intellectual, didactic and aesthetic framework, was determined in large part by his commitment to a radical socialist purposefulness. Lawson was in continual contact with the vanguard of revolutionary, radical, socialist thinkers and activists. He puts his friends from this Bourke period into his stories with their names minimally changed

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57.

<sup>96</sup> A. G. Stephens, *Bulletin* (29 August 1896), in *Selected Writing*, p.257; cf. Brian Kiernan, ed., *Henry Lawson* (Portable Australian Authors), St Lucia, 1976, pp.xii, 120ff.

and their union roles they did indeed play spelled out: Teddy Thompson, Tom Hall, the shearers' Union Secretary, Billy Woods, the Labourers' Union Secretary, and 'Donald Macdonald—shearer, union leader and labour delegate to the colonies on occasion'. Once again Lawson was within this vanguard group under Lane's influence. Both William Wood and Tom Hicks-Hall became organisers for the New Australia Cooperative Settlement Association and joined Lane in the Colonia Cosme settlement in Paraguay in 1895, and Wood remained there after the settlement broke up, until his death in 1935. Teddy Thompson went there in 1893. Donald Macdonald was responsible for getting the Sydney *Worker* going again in 1897, organizing the Bourke branch of the AWU to take it over, merging it with the *Workman*, and making it pay for itself by 1898.<sup>97</sup> The stress on the native woodrose wild, unlettered son of the soil, Australian nationalist image of Lawson is one that fails to take account of the intense and unique socialist education that continual contact with such people meant. He wrote for the radical and union press. He worked with journalists and union organizers who discussed the lively range of progressive socialist ideas in circulation. Radical works were serialized, excerpted, reviewed and sold through the union. To read Lawson's stories out of context, to exclude this milieu in which he lived, wrote, published and took his pleasure, is to give a deprived and inadequate and ultimately absurd account of his art.

Even that classic comic story 'The Loaded Dog' has its politics.

They had a big black young retriever dog—or rather an overgrown pup, a big, foolish, four-footed mate, who was always slobbering round them and lashing their legs with his heavy tail that swung round like a stock-whip. Most of his head was usually a red, idiotic, slobbering grin of appreciation of his own silliness. He seemed to take life, the world, his two-legged mates, and his own instinct as a huge joke.<sup>98</sup>

Ken Stewart has extrapolated these mateship allusions to claim that

<sup>97</sup> *Children of the Bush*, pp.5, 29; Souter, *op. cit.*, p.254; R. B. Walker *The Newspaper Press in New South Wales, 1803–1920*, Sydney, 1976, p.136; Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, pp.89–91.

<sup>98</sup> *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, p.186.

'The Dog is idealized Mateship', 'a caricature of his own masters and a satirical but delighted idealization of bush gregariousness'.<sup>99</sup> But there is a further political dimension to the mateship references. It was William Lane who explored the identification of socialism and mateship in his socialist propaganda. And the mateship of the dog here is given its political colouration. It is red and black, the colours of anarchy. Anarchism was one of the theoretical positions of the radical left groups with which Lawson associated. Geisner, in Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise*, explains

Anarchical Communism, that is men working as mates and sharing with one another of their own free-will, is the highest conceivable form of Socialism in industry.<sup>100</sup>

The association of the loaded dog with anarchism is emphasized by the 'formidable bomb' that it carries in its mouth. We tend now to associate bombs with aerial warfare; but in 1901 the bomb was more specifically the instrument of the anarchists.

The dog that steals the bomb and then gets blown up is described as

a vicious yellow mongrel cattle-dog sulking and nursing his nastiness under there—a sneaking, fighting, thieving canine, whom neighbours had tried for years to shoot or poison.<sup>101</sup>

Denton Prout identified the phrase 'yellow dog' as a term used for a non-union contract.<sup>102</sup> The destruction of the yellow dog would then suggest the destruction of either the pastoralists' contract, or of the non-union scab labour that signed it. When the original dog is described for the last time in the story it is 'smiling his broadest, longest and reddest smile of amiability'.<sup>103</sup> The red aspect, the communist revolutionary, is stressed. The identifying colouration alternates between the red and

99 Ken Stewart, '“The Loaded Dog”: A Celebration', *Australian Literary Studies* 11 (1983): 155–6.

100 *The Workingman's Paradise*, pp.112–3.

101 *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, pp.190–1.

102 Denton Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1963, p.125.

103 *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, p.193.

black anarchist and the red communist and socialist.

In 'Barney Take Me Home Again' in *Children of the Bush* the destructive aspects of migration are examined. This has never been a recognized theme in English language culture in the way it has in modern Greek culture, the loss and tragedy implicit in having to leave one's homeland in order to find work. The narrator visits the Johnsons who have returned to London and Lawson records his appalled reaction to English working class conditions.

It was a blind street, like the long, narrow yard of a jail, walled by dark houses, all alike. The next door but one to that at which I knocked to inquire was where the Johnsons lived; they lived in a four-storey house, or rather a narrow section of a four-storeyed terrace. I found later on that they paid the landlord, or nearly paid him, by letting lodgings. They lived in one room with the use of the parlour and the kitchen when the lodgers weren't using them, and the son shared a room with a lodger. The back windows looked out on the dead wall of a poorhouse of some kind, the front on rows of similar windows opposite—rows of the same sort of windows that run for miles and miles in London. In one a man sat smoking in his shirt-sleeves, from another a slavey leaned out watching a four-wheeler that had stopped next door, in a third a woman sat sewing, and in a fourth a woman was ironing, with a glimpse of a bedstead behind her. And all outside was gloom and soot and slush.<sup>104</sup>

And he remarks as much as the material conditions, the defeat of spirit. 'I would never have recognized the Johnsons' he says 'I found Johnson an old man—old and grey before his time'.<sup>105</sup>

When I left Johnson I felt less lonely in London, and rather humbled in spirit. He seemed so resigned—I had never seen such gentle sadness in a man's eyes, nor heard it in a man's voice. I

104 *Children of the Bush*, p.183.

105 *Ibid*, p.103



could get back to Australia somehow and start life again, but Johnson's day had been dead for many years.<sup>106</sup>

The fullest expression of Lawson's English experience is collected in *Triangles of Life*, a volume proposed and prepared in 1907 but not published until 1913. The 94 page title story offers a comparative study of Australia and England, a theme broached with 'Barney Take Me Home Again'. There it was the woman who could not adjust to the rawness of pioneering life, and the account of her dissatisfactions are the substance of the first part of the story. In 'Triangles of Life' it is the young man, Billy, who has developed the horrors and is shipped back to England. The first part set in Australia describes his collapse, and the other two parts deal with what happens to him on his return. The story takes its title from old Higgins' meditations on an old elementary book of Euclid. "Life," he'd say, after some preliminary shuffles, coughs and grunts, "is wot I call made up of triangles—ekal hatteral triangles." But this is given a political gloss by 'Brennan, the silent semi-foreman' (a *Reynold's Newspaper* reader): "You're right there, Higgins, and you and me and the rest of us in hundreds of English villages are shoring up the props. And they're comin' down, Higgins!"<sup>107</sup> 'The Triangles' are also one of the infamous punishments of Australia's convict days—convicts were attached to them and flogged. And so Lawson assembles this ambitious three part story, the first part in the bush, the second part seemingly irrelevant, digressive observations of village life near London, and then the third side in which Billy, returned from Australia, settles down with Lizzie, who has a child and various liasons in London. Bob, Billy's old mate from Australia who had nursed him through the horrors, returns to England and stays with them, and the gossip within the village generates and creates the very situation it fantasized, Billy breaking up with Lizzie who goes to live with Bob. It is an examination of the complexities of mateship and communality, of the failures of communication and of misunderstandings. It shows the alienation and isolation of the workingman's life in the bush; and then it shows the repressive nature of English life—class ridden, controlled by the expectations of class roles monitored by gossips. And nobody wins.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.185.

<sup>107</sup> *Triangles of Life*, pp.36–37.

Bob doesn't want Lizzie, and at the story's end Billy is sailing out to Australia again on the *Gera*, and Bob was aboard the *Karlsruhe*, a fortnight ahead, Lizzie left in England.<sup>108</sup>

In 'The Letters to Jack Cornstalk' (*Argosy*, October 1900, January and February 1901) Lawson presents himself as an 'Australian' for his critical perspective of England, not a vanguard socialist or a proletarian. It leads to a quasi-Mark Twain bumptiousness, a cocksureness that now seems more defensive than anything else. It is the tone of the upstart colonial, the proletarian larrikin mutated into the colonial tourist, modelled on the American. Yet the blustering critique of St Pauls retains a socialist basis: its atmosphere, 'suggestive of wide spaces,' is 'one of the apparently useless lies of civilization—but I suppose it's born of commercialism, like most other lies—a little branch line lie of commercialism.'<sup>109</sup> Something of the indictment of the university which D. H. Lawrence delivers in *The Rainbow* is captured here.<sup>110</sup> But in general the assertive note suggests that Lawson is not totally at ease with the tone. It isn't his tone, but a tone he is adopting, a persona, an image. As a foreigner in England he is treated as a gentleman, but he knows he is a proletarian. But he knows the risks of a proclaimed proletarianism or a proclaimed socialism. He mentions the absence of politics in the English village. His own absence of politics he does not mention. But it is indicated by mention of this other, parallel, absence. The inexpressible politics are displaced into nationalism. The 'colonial' was an acceptable caricature, a mask. The problem, however, is that masks like nationalism can suffocate their wearers. The necessity of subterfuge meant that inside the mask Lawson was with difficulty holding onto his real identity.

Alcohol can be seen as the response to the crisis of his art in which his political commitment became increasingly inexpressible. The climate of repression with the defeat of the unions by the mid-nineties had made revolutionary sentiments unacceptable in the press. Lawson's poetic vision of revolution mutated into a vision of war, enemy unspecified. It could be the class enemy; but it could be taken as a national enemy and

108 *Ibid.*, p.92. Lawson's wife and two children sailed from England to Australia on the *Karlsruhe*, 30 April 1902, and Lawson followed on the *Gera*, 21 May (Clark, *Henry Lawson*, p.133).

109 *Ibid.*, p.119.

110 D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (1915), Harmondworth, 1961, pp.434–35.

the solidarity that of patriotism or race, not class. The left itself was fragmented. The parliamentary Labor Party had little appeal for Lawson. While the failure of Lane's New Australia enterprise, with Lane himself abandoning it in 1899, afforded little hope of alternatives to the parliamentary model.

But turning to personal themes of domesticity and sexuality, Lawson soon found these equally inexpressible. The political put him in impossible conflict with society, an author dependent on acceptance by the commercial media. The domestic-sexual-familial put him in impossible conflict with his wife, and his mother. His mode of transparency, of exploration and recollection of interrelationships, allowed few disguises. His aesthetic was based on drawing from life, on a realism he identified with his socialist commitment. In *Triangles of Life* he goes as far as he can psychologically dare push himself in writing about the collapse of his marriage. It is there in two powerful stories, 'Drifting Apart' and 'A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father'. The failing marriage in that latter story suggests too the marriage of his parents, and his own childhood resentments of his mother.

Lawson's work is comparatively unknown outside Australia today. Within Australia, his profile for a while adorning the ten dollar note, he has become a nationalist icon, and his specifically socialist vision has been obscured, though not forgotten. It is something his friend, Fred Broomfield, stressed in 1930:

Lawson's name is refused a place on the scroll of Australian literature by the superfine critics, on the ground that he voiced the emotions of a class—the rank and file of 'My Army, O My Army'—rather than a nation—or, at least, that is one of the reasons given, apart from the alleged rudeness and crudity of his verse-form. But what a class! What a toiling universe of sorrow-smitten men and women found an utterance through his verse! It has been said that Lawson, when a lad, was caught in the spell of socialism. That may be, but he never altered. In one of his poems written in later life he declared that he was 'too old to rat'.<sup>111</sup>

111 Fred J. Broomfield, *Henry Lawson and His Critics*, Sydney, 1930, p.37. On Broomfield see Ann-Mari Jorden, 'Fred J. Broomfield', *Australian Literary Studies* 9 (1980): 468. The Poem quoted is 'The Old Unionist', *CV*, 3 (1969), pp.94–95.

The recognition of Henry Lawson as a serious and subtle artist has been a major critical achievement of the last thirty years. We now have an understanding of Lawson as a conscious and sensitive and sophisticated writer. But the concentration on the artistry and craft of Lawson's writing has been at the expense of his ideas.

The critical consensus has been that Lawson's best work is not to be found in his political writing. When, however, we restore the historical context of Lawson's work, when we resituate it in its once contemporary context of ideas, a much fuller reading emerges. That separation of the political and the non-political dissolves, and we find in those works that now endure a rich specificity of social observation and political thought. The seemingly casual, artless sketches are revealed as contributions to an on-going debate of ideas. That is why we continue to turn to his writings, and come away from them with the satisfactions of delight and instruction.