

Bronzed Aussie: The Memorialisation of Henry Lawson

CHRIS LEE, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

The movement to memorialise Henry Lawson in bronze in Sydney's Domain grew out of the public political turmoil that had characterised the poet's State funeral. Peter Lawson, the poet's brother, advised the National Party Premier, Sir George Fuller, that if he initiated a memorial campaign he might redress the political fallout from Labor Party allegations that he had moved to block the State funeral. On the receipt of Peter Lawson's letter, Fuller wrote to Alderman McElthone, the Lord Mayor of Sydney, requesting that the Mayor call a public meeting in the Town Hall at which he, as Premier, might move a resolution 'to launch a movement for the establishment of a lasting memorial to Henry Lawson'.¹

The citizens' meeting drew about fifty people. In spite of some criticism from Labor parliamentarian Tom Mutch, for the manner in which the meeting was called, the gathering agreed to the memorial motion, which was put by the Premier and seconded by Mr James Dooley, the leader of the Labor opposition.² Sir George quoted freely from several of Lawson's poems before exciting the generous applause of the gathering with a fervent endorsement of Lawson as an imperially loyal chronicler of the nation:

No poet had ever expressed Australian sentiment or portrayed Australian life and manners in so natural and effective a manner as the man whose memory we are met to honour and to perpetuate. Twenty years before Gallipoli Henry Lawson foretold in prose and verse how the young men of Australia would rally to the motherland in time of danger. His writings had so inspired the whole continent that they would live in the history of Australia for all time.³

The opposition leader then rose to argue that by his works, Lawson had 'built a monument that would last as long as Australian history'. Lawson, like Scotland's Robbie Burns, had 'lived the life of the people, among the people, ... of the people'. It was therefore appropriate that a statue of the poet be placed opposite the Burns monument near the Art Gallery. Rose Scott mentioned that she had already received expressions of financial support from old-age pensioners and swagmen. G.H. Godsell, the President of the Institute of Architects, then proposed, and the Honourable MLA Mr Tom Mutch seconded, a motion to appoint an Executive Committee that comprised very nearly everyone in attendance.⁴

The press supported the memorial committee's proposal for a statue in the main, but some papers and their correspondents had different ideas. The *Freeman's Journal* called for an extension of bush nursing, a 'seaside sanatorium for the sick and wounded women of the hot interior', or a beach holiday settlement for outback children, as more practical alternatives to the lump of bronze.⁵ A.G. Stephens wrote to the *Telegraph* suggesting that the best way to honour the dead was to help the living: 'there are three Australian poetical writers of high merit—Quinn, McRae, and Neilson—who in different circumstances deserve steady aid,' he wrote. 'Shall we give them their own bread or Lawson's stone?'⁶ In the same paper, Rose Scott agreed that there should be a memorial, but she preferred that it take the form of a simple monument over his grave

with an inscription and an appropriate quotation from his verse. A more important consideration, she went on to argue, was the need to secure an allowance from the Commonwealth for the support of the poet's widow. The *Telegraph's* own plan, however, was by far the most moving and visionary of the suggestions. It proposed placing a Statue of Liberty size sculptural reproduction of Frank Mahony's sketch of Lawson 'on the wallaby' upon a hundred foot pedestal on Fort Denison.⁷

After an initial hiccup, a small committee strategically comprised of individuals representing key constituencies for Lawson's reputation, raised sufficient funds for a monument to Lawson and the endowment of a commemorative prize at the University. The bulk of this money came from the *Bulletin* fund, the Australian Workers Union campaign, and in particular the NSW Teachers' Federation, who raised the lion's share through a vigorous campaign in the schools.

By August of 1924 the *Bulletin* fund stood at £319-2-1, the general fund into which went Union and general contributions was £263-19-11, and the Teachers' Federation fund held £1,300-0-0. One month later the contribution of the Schools had risen to £1,921-3-6⁸ and the fund was well on the way towards its target of £2,500. The committee decided it was time to secure an artist for the monument and a site for its location.

The process of engaging an appropriate artist re-ignited the debate over the apparent incompatibility between Art and Australianness that has been such a significant feature of the writer's early reception. Leslie Wilkinson, Professor and Dean of Architecture at Sydney University suggested that the competition be limited to 'British' sculptors because it was a 'special Australian subject' which required an artist who had 'smelt Australia'. Sydney Ure Smith, the editor of *Art in Australia* and President of the Society of Artists, went further. He immediately took issue with the advertisement of the competition outside Australia; though he conceded that the best artist would inevitably be one from the 'other side'. In the end the logistical problems associated with an International competition saw it confined to Australian sculptors with the understanding that Australian might refer either to citizenship or residency.

The committee set out quite specific instructions on how the competitors ought to depict Lawson. The statue was to be of heroic size (eight feet high), cast in bronze, and placed upon a suitable pedestal. Each competitor received a set of photographs, a physical description of Lawson, and suggestions concerning the manner of his depiction. The latter made the following points:

- The Committee are anxious to obtain not only a correct portrait in bronze but also a work of art which will suggest Lawson as a typical figure in the beginnings of an Australian Literature.
- They desire that he be represented as an Australian of the Bush, and not of the city.
- They recognise the sculptural difficulty in representing in bronze a figure in modern costume, such as a sac suit, and they consider that Lawson would be more picturesquely and typically represented in the costume of a bush worker without coat or vest, with shirt open at the neck, trousers (not riding breeches) fairly closely fitting, boots similar to the type worn by Australian soldiers at the War, hat—soft felt which has lost its stiffness and original set form.

Nineteen models by seventeen sculptors were submitted for the competition from which the expert panel of Gother V.F. Mann, Sydney Ure Smith, Thea Proctor and Leslie Wilkinson chose a group conception by George W Lambert. Lambert depicted Lawson standing in front of an isolated fence post upon which hung a discarded tucker

bag. On the poet's left, a weather beaten sundowner squatted on his swag. At his right sat an alert sheepdog-kelpie. Lawson held his hat to his chest and seemed gesturing towards some distant prospect. The sculptor was invited to do a full size model before the Committee awarded the commission and it was not until the end of September in 1927 that the Committee was able to inspect the sketch model at Lambert's studio in the Prince of Wales Hospital.

This model was accepted as 'generally suitable' but Brereton was unhappy with the conventional representation of the poet. No poet looked like this. He felt that the Lawson figure needed to display more 'strength of character' considering his 'appeal was to the bushman and to the vigorous'. He also considered the hair 'unnecessarily long'. Ifould was directed to instruct the sculptor to 'strengthen' the figure of Lawson by making him less of a 'stage poet' in general, and by making his hands 'more virile' in particular. A glance at Lambert's preliminary pencil sketch of the Lawson figure makes it quite clear what Brereton and the Committee were complaining about. The stance of the model, its slender figure, and the flaccid poise of its delicate hands and wrists are effeminate. It is very different from the heroic independent images of Bush characters widely produced by artists and illustrators—Lambert included—in the later part of the nineteenth century.⁹ Henry Lawson was again in need of some 'sturdy Australian backbone'.

Lambert had a great deal of trouble with the sculpture—particularly in capturing the peculiarities of Lawson's face—and there were more delays. Ifould referred him to the photographs of the poet supplied to the original competitors and suggested he might seek out the poet's brother, Peter, as an additional model. Amy Lambert, the artist's wife, has explained that the poet her husband remembered 'conflicted with the recent photographs with which he had been supplied' (Lambert 182). Lambert also had problems with the different memories of committee members who knew Lawson in different periods of his life. As July gave way to September the growing impatience of the Public School Teachers' Federation and other interested parties began to draw media attention, and Lambert sent for fellow sculptor Nelson Illingsworth's death mask of Lawson.

By January of 1929, Lambert had completed Lawson's 'picturesque clothes' but the face remained an obstacle. In April the Committee formally reminded the sculptor of his contractual obligations. Though not without reservation, John le Gay Brereton tried to help by arranging for Lawson's son Jim to sit for him. Lawson's wife, Bertha, claims that Lambert used both her children as models. Jim provided the hair, hands, and ears, and Bertha the neck and lower half of the face.¹⁰ Nevertheless Lambert continued to struggle with the 'curving trench ... that meant so much to [Lawson's] expression'.¹¹ In February Ifould had the Crown Solicitor issue the sculptor with a letter of demand. The plaster model was approved by March and three months later Lambert was dead.

A very interesting argument now broke out over a change of site. The sculptor had become disenchanted with the proposal to situate the monument near the Burns statue at the St Mary's gates entrance to the Domain and with the support of the State Librarian and the chair of the Memorial Committee W.H. Ifould, he requested an alternative site between the twin threads of Mrs Macquarie's Road beyond the official boundaries of the Domain and the Botanical Gardens. 'He wants to get it a bit withdrawn from the Sydney Domain crowd,' Ifould wrote to Brereton.¹²

Will Carter, the President of the Henry Lawson Literary Society, which was formed in 1928 as a result of the Teacher's Federation's involvement in the memorial

campaign, wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in protest.¹³ 'Why place the Mitchell Library on the most conspicuous corner of the most conspicuous street of the city with the splendid Shakespearian group adjacent', he wrote, 'and then consign our national literary creator to the background'.¹⁴ If Lawson was placed where the former President of the Society and member of the Memorial Fund Committee, A.G. Alanson, had originally suggested 'we should then see the Australian Burns first, and when possibly later on a Kendall memorial is erected farther down between the Burns statue and the Art Gallery, we should have a Poets Walk or Way, sculpturally linking the glorious architecture of Saint Mary's Cathedral with the Art Gallery and its superb collection'. Surely the schools which raised most of the funds for the monument should have a say in its location, he concluded. W.B. Dalley, whose distinguished father was represented by his own statue in Hyde Park, thought Carter's final suggestion ridiculous.¹⁵ The choice of site required aesthetic expertise, for 'the placing of statuary is more vital than the hanging of a picture; its site is comparable to but more important than a picture's frame'.¹⁶ Mackennal's Shakespeare group is an excellent example of fine statuary placed in an unsuitable location, not because it is too public a position but because it had not been designed for the panoramic display afforded by its island setting.

Old and familiar oppositions structured the debate over the site: High/Low, Art/Society, Genius/Popularity. The left wanted Lawson set in a busy public location while the right wished him appropriately consigned to an aesthetic space, which it envisaged as a public site for private contemplation. The political positions from which the debate was waged are not quite this simple, however, for art was often seen by both sides to transcend the political. By providing a system of value that was above politics, the aesthetic argument was able to gather support from across the political spectrum, as Mary Gilmore was to demonstrate.

Gilmore, never one to remain silent in any discussion of Lawson, proved singularly creative in her solution to the stand-off between the aesthetes and the popularists. It was originally her idea to place Lawson's monument near that of Burns, she claimed, and during his life-time Lawson had humbly approved of her notion. Gilmore conceded, however, that her friend would be the last one to oppose the wishes of those in charge of the monument. She therefore thought that yet another site might best settle the issue. Seizing upon Dalley's criticism of the unsuitable location of the Shakespeare group, she proposed swapping the monuments. Lawson's group should be placed on the prominent Macquarie street site and Shakespeare could be removed to poetic seclusion at the back of the Botanical Gardens.

The comparison of the 'great master-poet of our Empire', Shakespeare, and the national Australian poet, Lawson, was proving popular, and on June 15, E.L. Cooper used it to relegate Lawson to his appropriate class. The poet's sympathies were 'too narrow and too shallow' to represent the whole of Australia, and his 'contempt for the educated people' restricts him to the 'bushmen, swagmen, bullock-drivers, shearers, sundowners, deadbeats, rouseabouts, rovers, and "world-battlers" '. Compared to Shakespeare he is 'lacking universal appeal'.¹⁷

The Labor Press didn't miss its opportunity to get in on the act and it weighed in with an editorial censuring the 'limelighters and bickerers' who were trying to steal the credit for the successful funding campaign from the children, the shearers and Mary Gilmore. The *Labor Daily* took up the site controversy in the context of this little squabble and insisted that Lawson be given 'some favoured spot in the sun' where he could listen to the orators' and enjoy the flowers, the children and the weekend sports-people:

It was hoped that he would be given a status similar to that enjoyed by Burns and Shakespeare, so that he could meet these great men on terms of statuesque equality. But no; Lawson whose message is far more intimate and personal, so far as Australia is concerned ... has been relegated to the outer darkness ...¹⁸

Having made its political point vis-a-vis the site, the paper quickly returned to the unveiling ceremony itself. In its opinion an occasion which ought to be a national holiday so that the men, women and children of Australia could pay homage had been turned into an 'exclusive ... garden-party' for the establishment.¹⁹

The debate over the choice of the site for the memorial that preceded its unveiling reinstated the positions which had contested the state funeral in time for the unveiling of the monument they had inspired. Ifould attempted to co-ordinate a ceremony in which the different (often incompatible) interests in Lawson's memory could find themselves recognised as equal citizens loyal to a unifying symbol of the nation. The Left, however, had as much to gain from division, as the Right had to gain by unity, and the well-established battle lines from the funeral of 1922 meant that Ifould's task was a difficult one. Volatile, contemporary conflicts between the State Labor Government, the Legislative Council and the Governor, Sir Phillip Game, rendered it tantamount to impossible.

At 3:00 p.m. on 28 July 1931, Joe Jackson, a Henry Lawson Memorial Fund Committee member who was now the Lord Mayor of Sydney, began the unveiling ceremony with a short speech. Jackson celebrated Lawson's work and asked that it be allowed to stand upon its own merits free from odious comparisons with the 'Olympian' Burns. Sir Phillip Game then rose to unveil the statue which a blustery wind had already contrived to display before the people. At the time the Governor was locked in a struggle of wills with another committee member, Jack Lang, the recalcitrant Labor Premier who was seeking control of a hostile upper house. Only two days earlier, Lang had addressed a gathering of 250,000 in the Domain where he called for the Governor to stop obstructing the democratically elected parliament of the people. Given this remarkable political context it is little wonder that the Labor press wanted Henry's statue in the Inner Domain where the gathered throngs might have milled about him. Game's version of Lawson's reputation not surprisingly fell in with the establishment narrative active within the state education system. Lawson was a faithful chronicler of a pioneering era that was now slipping past a modern nation progressing towards a promising future. There was very little for the besieged Labor Premier in the Governor's nostalgic celebration of his famous brother-in-law. Lang wanted a politically utile opposition and so did the Labor press. The unveiling of the Henry Lawson Memorial in the outer Domain provided yet another opportunity for Labor to manage a set of confrontations that might secure the party as the legislative voice of the people. The immediate political context, the cast of public figures involved and the site of the ceremony itself made this an imperative.

Lawson, like the nation he was supposed to represent, had become a field of struggle for rival personal, social, cultural and political values. The disagreements which prefigured the unveiling ceremony structured its reception, and so fighting broke out over Lambert's representation of Lawson, the unveiling ceremony, and the guest list and its apparent ranking. While the mainstream press went for superlatives and the left made good use of its political opportunity, those who had known Lawson tended to be disappointed with Lambert's representation.

The Henry Lawson Memorial began as the public inspiration of a conservative

politician seeking to reaffirm himself as a popular Australian. The campaign sought to overcome the social, cultural and political divisions that were a feature of the national poet's funeral with a monument that all might contribute to. Lawson scholars have often attempted to sort truth from fiction so that they might map the real Henry Lawson. Lawson's death, his burial and his memorialisation demonstrate that as an icon of Australia he is neither real nor authentic, but a source of capital to be contested by the rival interests that score and divide what can only ever be the misplaced dream of one nation.

Notes

- 1 Letter from Sir George Fuller to Alderman W.P. McElhone, 14 September 1922, Mutch Papers, MSS 426/24, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- 2 The correspondence between Peter Lawson and Sir George Fuller at the time stressed the importance of heading off the Labor Party's plan to launch its own memorial program. See correspondence in Mutch Papers, MSS 426/24, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- 3 'Henry Lawson Memorial Proposed,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 September 1922, Clipping in the 'Henry Lawson File' of the Premier's Department, Mutch Papers, MSS 426/24, Mitchell Library.
- 4 The executive committee included: The Lord Mayor, Sir William Cullen, Sir George and Lady Fuller, Mr James Dooley, Sir William Vicars, Sir Samuel Hordern, Sir Henry Braddon, J. Lane Mullins, W. Farmer Whyte, T.H.Kelly, G.H.Godsell, T.D.Mutch, Roderick Quinn, Major Knox, W.A.Holman, Mr and Mrs David Gilpin, W.B.Dalley, Lawrence Campbell, H.A. Conant, Phillip Harris, J.L.Gay Brereton, Mary Gilmore, Campbell Jones, F.B.Wilkinson, J. Moses, Mr Justice Ferguson, George Wright, W.H.Ifould, Arthur Grim, Mr Hendry, J.T.Lang, Chas Lloyd, A.G.Alanson, L.T.Latter, and H.W.Horsefield. Oscar Lines, H.H.Massie, and C.M.C Shannon were elected joint Honourable Treasurers, and T.G.Nesbitt and W.G.Layton joint Honourable Secretaries. 'Henry Lawson Memorial Proposed'.
- 5 'Henry Lawson Memorial,' *Freeman's Journal*, 14 September 1922.
- 6 Letter from A.G. Stephens to the Editor of the *Telegraph*, 21 September 1922; *Telegraph*, 22 September 1922.
- 7 [Henry Lawson Memorial], *Telegraph*, 30 September 1922, Newspaper Cutting, Henry Lawson Memorial Papers.
- 8 Henry Lawson Memorial Fund Committee Minute Books, Henry Lawson Memorial Fund Papers, MSS 3588, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- 9 For an account of the late nineteenth century development of a series of conventions for the representation of heroic rural portraiture in Australia that was inspired by popular illustration, photography, contemporary European art, and *plein air* technique, see Leigh Astbury, *City Bushmen: The Heidelberg School and the Rural Mythology*, (Melbourne: OUP, 1985).
- 10 Bertha Lawson, quoted in Colin Roderick, 'Henry Lawson: Man and Myth,' *Southerly* 42 (1982), p.468.
- 11 Letter from John Le Gay Brereton to G.W. Lambert, 25 May 1929, Lambert Family Papers, MSS 7/5, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- 12 Letter from W.H. Ifould to John Le Gay Brereton, 18 October 1928, Brereton Papers, MSS 281/7, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- 13 For a detailed account of the formation of the Henry Lawson Society, its relationship to the Henry Lawson Memorial Movement and its later activities, see Lesley Heath, *Sydney Literary Societies of the Nineteen Twenties: Cultural nationalism and the Promotion of Australian Literature*, PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 1996, pp. 222-78.
- 14 Letter from Will Carter to the Editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 'The Lawson Statue,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 June 1931.
- 15 D.H. Souter described it as 'dapper and dumpy ... a figure of fun for all time'. D.H. Souter, 'Henry Lawson and Statues of Great Men in Sydney Rendezvous,' *Country Life and Stock and Station Journal*, 7 August 1931, p. 2.
- 16 Letter from W.B. Dalley to the Editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 'The Lawson Memorial,' Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 1931.

- 17 Letter from E.L. Cooper to the Editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 'The Lawson Statue,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 June 1931.
- 18 'If Statues Could Speak,' *Labour Daily*, 28 July 1931.
- 19 Art and class were not the only issues in the debate over the site. *The Melbourne Age* used the occasion to send up the city of Sydney. 'Lambert chose a place where the statue should be erected in a place of quiet meditation and peace remote from the gay throngs in the garden but close to where the down-and-out proletariat go to bye bye 'neath the stars. Lambert knew his Lawson and chose the place he would have himself chosen.... But it would not be Sydney if it did not change its mind about a thing concerning, which, after much discussion and thought finality has been reached ... A statue's life is not worth living in this place of changes'. 'The Lawson Memorial,' *Melbourne Age*, 13 June 1931.

Works cited

- Lambert, Amy. *The Career of G.W. Lambert, A.R.A.: Thirty Years of an Artist's Life*. Sydney: Society of Artists, 1938.