

Henry Lawson - Background ...

For almost as long as anyone in Bourke can remember, there have been Bartons living in the town or district. There were six brothers in the first Barton family, all tall men, over six foot. Their parents, Edmund and Sophia, had arrived in Adelaide in 1839, destined to live out their lives as poor potato farmers in the Brownhill Creek area.

Russell, the eldest brother, was the first to arrive in Bourke in 1864, overlanding ten thousand sheep to stock local properties. Later he purchased Mooculta Station, and held a financial interest in Willara and Brindingabba runs, along with his brother Wickstead. He was also involved in the copper mines in Cobar and Nymagee and later became one of the local Members of Parliament for the Bourke electorate. In later years he owned a large tract of land in Five Dock, Sydney, where he built his home, "Russell Lea". This area is now known as the suburb of Russell Lea, and local roads such as Mooculta, Russell, Janet, Undine and McCulloch were named in connection with Russell's family.

The remaining five Barton brothers eventually settled in Bourke or the surrounding district during the latter part of the 1800s with their wives and families. Initially they were involved in local family businesses, which, besides the pastoral holdings, included a butcher shop, mobile wool-scouring plant, stock dealing and copper mining. Versatility was the name of the game in the bush.

Eventually the men diversified their interests. Pearce became well-known in the Gongolgan and Brewarrina districts. Edmund later took up the position of pastoral inspector for the local Land Department, and Grainger was manager of the Petrolia Boring Company, which was involved in sinking artesian bores about the local district. Wickstead moved his family to Nymagee, where he was probably an overseer for Russell's copper mine interests.

My great-great grandfather, Wakefield Barton, was the fourth son in the family. He came to Bourke about 1871 with his wife Jessie and their three surviving children. After trying his hand in the family's butchering business in Mitchell Street, he took his small brood "on the track", to Willara Station on the Paroo River, near Hungerford on the New South Wales-Queensland border. Later they moved to Wanaaring, where he purchased and operated the Paroo Inn. Or rather, Jessie ran the pub and added to their growing family while Wakefield travelled the countryside with his wool scouring plant.

Life was tough in the bush. All told, Jessie gave birth to fourteen babies, however the rate of child mortality was high and Jessie lost eight of those children in infancy. Death certificates cite causes such as "teething" and "accidental death", the latter referring to her six-year-old son who was crushed under a collapsing water cart. Two young daughters, aged 16

months and four months, died within a day of each other from whooping cough. The rigours of childbirth, combined with an arduous life in the bush and more than her fair share of grief, took their toll and Jessie died at the age of forty-five from kidney failure.

By the turn of the century, Wakefield was the only brother remaining in Bourke, and many of his descendants still reside in town or on properties in the nearby Wanaaring and Hungerford districts. It is probably this long standing association with Bourke that led to my father's passion for local history, and over the years he researched many aspects of early life in the district: river navigation, general history, artesian bores, local families etc. You name it, he was interested in anything concerning Bourke, and willingly passed on his knowledge and research material to other writers. I regularly saw his name in the acknowledgement sections of subsequent publications.

About 1985 he became interested in Henry Lawson's scantily-documented visit to the area in 1892-93 and his research took a new path, and took over his life. It was during my 1994 visit to Bourke, researching for a novel I planned to write, that he showed me his Lawson research material, a huge folder full, telling me excitedly of a collection of previously undiscovered poems that had been found. I suggested the possibility of a book 'Let's put your name on the front cover, instead of inside,' I suggested.

Back on the Gold Coast, I rang my agent - Selwa Anthony - in Sydney. Did she think there would be any interest from a publisher in the material? "Go for it," she replied.

We did. Dad's notes arrived courtesy of Australia Post. With my two index fingers I started typing. The book you now hold before you is the result.

Sadly my father died while the final editing process of *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling* was in progress. This book was his dream, his goal, and it remains a testament to his life and his passion: the history of his beloved Bourke.

Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling deals mainly with the nine months that Lawson spent in Bourke and the surrounding district during 1892-93. In many ways these months were a separate part of the poet's life, distanced from his city experiences not only by hundreds of miles but by a different kind of existence, and the story set out in this book must be taken in context with Lawson's life as a whole, certainly in the events leading up to his arrival in the town in September.

By 1892 Henry Lawson was twenty-five years of age and reasonably well-established in his skills as a versifier. Poems such as "Faces in the Street", "Andy's Gone with the Cattle", "The Teams" and "The Roaring Days" had already endeared him to the reading public, and much of his published

work was granted the distinction of accompanying illustrations by the most well-known artists of the time.

Several newspapers were eager to publish Lawson's work, the most well known being the *Sydney Bulletin*. Jointly owned by J. F. Archibald (who was also the editor) and William Macleod, the newspaper was the most significant literary journal of the time. Its success was due to its combination of news, politics and economics written mainly by Australians and aimed at Australian audiences. Not only did it provide an outlet for the work of many up-and-coming young writers, such as Lawson, the *Bulletin* was also known for its encouragement of black and white art, giving eventual prominence to cartoonists and illustrators such as Norman Lindsay, Will Dyson, Frank Mahony and Percy Leason.

A. G. Stephens later became the controller of the *Bulletin's* publishing division, and also editor of the newspaper's full-page literary section, known as the "Red Page". He helped many Australian writers, such as Mary Gilmore, Miles Franklin and Steele Rudd into print, in book form. In later years he and Lawson had a falling out, and Stephens was often critical of Lawson's writing and opinion on Australian life, particularly his views on the bush.

Another main publisher of Lawson's work was the *Brisbane Worker*. Established as a Labor journal in 1890, its founding editor was William Lane, propounder of the 'Utopia' movement that eventually established a settlement in Paraguay, South America. Lane used the *Worker* to push his own revolutionary and Labor-orientated ideas, and he was happy to accept Lawson's radical, and sometimes almost-libelous, verse for publication.

Prompted by a constant and chronic lack of finances, Lawson often succumbed to the demands of editors, churning out propaganda verse. He suggested his own dislike of such penmanship when he wrote "So you're writing for a paper? Well, it's nothing very new to be writing yards of drivel for a tidy little screw;" in "The Cambaroora Star", which was published in December 1891.

By early 1892, the signs of an economic depression were upon Australia and jobs were scarce. Between January and May of that year, Lawson wrote eight anti-establishment poems for John Norton, the editor of *Truth*. This newspaper was owned by William Nicholas Willis, a political aspirant who promoted himself in his own publication. The caustic verse included "The House of Fossils", "More Echoes From the Old Museum", and "Wales the First". They were published under the pseudonym "Cervus Wright", Lawson's own cryptic warning to those politicians he parodied.

Though Henry Lawson and Andrew Barton Paterson were both enjoying the popularity of their verse in the *Bulletin*, their views on bush poetry and the responsibility of writers to interpret bush conditions truthfully erupted into a very public debate in mid 1892. While Paterson's poems romanticised

the bush, Lawson painted the outback as he saw it, or imagined it to be—dismal and lacking promise. Paterson, who will always be remembered for his ballads such as "Man From Snowy River" and "Clancy of the Overflow", was a member of the Sydney legal fraternity, and was writing anonymously under the pseudonym of 'Banjo'. Lawson was one of the few people who knew his real identity.

Whether the 'duel of verse' was contrived as a novel form of publicity for Lawson's and Paterson's writing, or whether it had deeper undertones, is uncertain. However the readers of the *Bulletin* were certainly treated to a succession of controversial poems during the next few months.

Lawson opened the debate with "Borderland", which was published on 9 July 1892. It was later re-titled "Up the Country" when it was republished in Lawson's 1896 edition of *In the Days When the World Was Wide and Other Verses*. He began his verse with these few laconic comments:

I am back from up the country - very sorry that I went
Seeking out the Southern poets' land whereon to pitch my tent
I have lost a lot of idols, which were broken on the track,
Burnt a lot of fancy verses, and I'm glad that I am back.
Farther out may be the pleasant scenes of which our poets boast,
But I think the country's rather more inviting round the coast.
Anyway, I'll stay at present at a boarding house in town,
Drinking beer and lemon squashes, taking baths and cooling down.

Lawson's descriptions were crude and greatly embellished with scenes of "roasted bullock drivers", "lunny bullocks" and a "sun-dried shepherd". It is doubtful if, at that time, he had been further west than Bathurst and he had no real concept, except what he had been told by others, of the real outback.

While the idea for the 'duel of verse' may have been conceived as a joke, the barbs soon flew. Two weeks later, Paterson retaliated with "In Defence of the Bush". It was an attack that seemed to be directed, in the main, at Lawson, rather than his poem.

So you're back from up the country, Mister Lawson, where you went,
And you're cursing all the business in a bitter discontent;
Well, we grieve to disappoint you, and it makes us sad to hear
That it wasn't cool and shady - and there wasn't plenty beer,
And the loony bullock snorted when you first came into view;
Well, you know it's not so often that he sees a swell like you;

The poem continued on in a similar contemptuous tone, with the 'Banjo' pointing out to "Mr Lawson" that the bush varied with the seasons and if Lawson was to make the same journey in a few months, he would find the countryside much changed. The words "Mr Lawson" were later altered to "Mr Townsman" when the poem was included in the first edition of *The Man From Snowy River and Other Verses*.

While Paterson had the anonymity of a pseudonym with his retort, Lawson laid himself bare to the criticism that followed. The controversy in verse continued for several months, with various other poets and writers such as John le Gay Brereton, Edward Dyson, A. G. Stephens and Joseph Furphy joining in.

With "In Answer to Banjo and Otherwise", Lawson replied to Paterson's previous poem with a similar vein of caustic wit. He suggested that Banjo, in his bush wanderings had "travelled like a gent", and was content to experience the advantages of city life while writing in glowing terms of the wonders of the bush. The poem was later retitled "The City Bushman".

Lawson then followed this poem with another on 10 September, the "Grog-an'-Grumble Steeplechase", which was a parody of Banjo's "Open Steeplechase". Other poets and parodists continued the rhyme for a time, while Lawson and Paterson took a back seat to the proceedings.

Paterson retaliated with "An Answer to Various Bards" on October 1. Again, the poem was an attack on Lawson, referring to him as "the sad and soulful poet with a graveyard of his own" and including thinly-veiled references to Lawson's sometimes excessive drinking habits with the references to "beer", "pubs" and "bars".

By the time Paterson's last poem was published, Lawson was in the far western New South Wales town of Bourke. His passage there had been financed by J. F. Archibald of the *Bulletin*, and, in his own words, Lawson confirmed: "Towards the end of '92 I got £5 and a railway ticket from the *Bulletin* and went to Bourke. Painted, picked up in a shearing shed and swagged it for six months..."

Primed by the union leaders, Lawson spent his first few weeks in the town writing almost-libelous verse for the local newspaper, *The Western Herald and Darling River Advocate*. The poems elicited several retaliatory replies from a rival paper, the *Central Australian and Bourke Telegraph*. For many years, researchers investigating the poems believed that no copies of the *Western Herald* had survived, and that the poems would never be recovered. It was not until 1992 that Lawson's verses were discovered, exactly one hundred years after their initial publication.

The chance discovery of the poems is, in itself, an interesting story. In 1992 a group of local residents decided to hold a festival, designed to help local tourism and promote Bourke within the far western region. Mateship was decided upon as the ongoing theme of the festival and it was voted that each year one personality would be selected to represent the concept of mateship. That first year, Henry Lawson was nominated, celebrating the centenary of the poet's arrival in that town.

Paul Roe was the chairman of the committee. While on a trip to Sydney, researching the life of Lawson at the Mitchell Library, he noticed a microfilmed copy of a letter Lawson had written to his Aunt Emma in 1892, detailing fact that he, Lawson, was "doing a little work, sub rosa, for the Western Herald" and the Labor leaders had given him "some points for a local political poem", indicating that there would be a "sensation" when the paper came out the following day."

Returning to Bourke, and with the help of local Western Herald journalist Kris Meares, Paul checked the reels of microfilmed newspaper which were housed in the local library. Expecting to find one poem, they were amazed by their subsequent discovery. In total, Lawson wrote eight poems for the Western Herald and Darling River Advocate during the following month. The title of this publication is taken from the second of these poems—"A Stranger on the Darling". These eight poems are included in a later chapter of this book, the first time in over a century that they have been presented as a collection since their original publication.

While writing his 'Bourke' poems, Lawson obtained temporary employment as a house painter. He later worked as a rouseabout at Toorale woolshed before trekking many miles overland, eventually reaching the village of Hungerford on the New South Wales-Queensland border.

There, for the first time, Lawson saw the outback as it really was. "You can have no idea of the horrors of the country out here," he wrote to his Aunt Emma in Sydney. "Men tramp and beg and live like dogs." Gone were any idealistic images he may have previously held. His writings now possessed a distinct theme of remoteness and aridity, though often carrying a casualness about them, which only served to reinforce the 'casualness' of the bush.

Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling traces Lawson's wanderings about Bourke and "on the track", and accounts for the men he became friendly with. It was from these men that he later created the characters for much of his short stories and verse, although he dissuades us from the association when he wrote: "I do not identify myself...or my friends with any character in my work...names, locality, and distance and direction are often altered for convenience of rhyme...".

Despite his denials, it is easy to identify Lawson's writing with the experiences he had throughout his life, and he finally admitted this when he wrote "most of my hard-up experiences are in my published books, disguised but not exaggerated", in "Pursuing Literature in Australia" which was published in 1899.

Lawson recorded little of his time spent in Bourke and biographers have long puzzled over the chronology of his wanderings about the region. Thankfully some events that occurred during those months were enlarged

upon in later times by others, such as Billy Wood, Jim Gordon, Edwin Brady and, John Hawley. Using these reminiscences, many written over thirty years later, *Henry Lawson: A Stranger on the Darling* is a reconstruction of how the authors imagine Lawson spent his time in Bourke and beyond during 1892-93.

Long after Lawson had left the Bourke district, he was producing poetry and stories based on his western experiences. Although the majority of these were published during 1893, after his return to Sydney, he continued to write about the bush for years, as demonstrated by his 1905 poem, "The Heart of the Swag". Jim Gordon, Lawson's 1892-93 trekking partner, later enlarged upon this idiosyncrasy when he wrote:- "What he saw today, he seldom wrote of to-night, but in six months time, or a year or two years, that was his method." Another classic example of this was when Lawson wrote his well-known poem "Bourke", almost ten years after he had departed from the town. This popular work aligned Lawson closely with the far west and clearly showed his affection for the bush people and the unions.

Lawson's later life has been well-documented over the years: his marriage, voyage to London, judicial divorce, suicide attempts, all coupled with an ever-present drinking problem. Perhaps he was proclaiming his own attitude to life when he wrote in "The Wander-light" in 1902: "I'm at home and at ease on a track that I know not, And restless on a track that I know."

Lawson indeed was a restless, enigmatic character. After reading numerous biographies on the poet, then the stories and verse itself, one is left feeling some empathy with him, and some vague sense of having known the man, though for most of us that would have been an impossibility. W. E. FitzHenry once wrote that we "... who after all knew him [Lawson] so little, should be so profoundly stirred."