

Henry Lawson - Extract ...

Chapter Two (Pages 16–20)

**It was somewhere in September and the sun was going down,
When I came in search of "copy", to a Darling-River town;**

Archibald provided Lawson with a rail ticket to Bourke – one way – and the sum of £5 to assist with expenses for the first few weeks. The rail pass was valued at £4 and it was evident that whether Lawson was successful or not in his western venture he was obliged to pay his return fare to Sydney.

It was probably about 20 September 1892 when Henry Lawson boarded the Western Mail at Redfern Station, which was then the terminus for the railway, and headed for Bourke. Amongst his meagre possessions he carried a collection of books belonging to his friend Arthur Parker, and a set of paintbrushes. Archibald, perhaps fearing a last-minute boycott of his well-laid plan, sent a few of the *Bulletin* people to the station to wave him on his way. Commenting on Lawson's departure from Sydney, A. G. Stephens, the editor of the *Bulletin's* publishing division, recorded some years later:

Here was this unfortunate towny, deaf and shy and brooding, sent with a railway ticket and a few spare shillings to carry his swag through the unknown where he knew nobody...

Progressively the train ascended into the Blue Mountains, then descended to the Lithgow Valley via the now-famous zigzag railway line. Katoomba. Medlow Bath. Mount Victoria. Mountain railway stations. Valleys dropped dizzily away from the rail line into dark shadows. Wisps of fog. Though it was September, the night air was cold. Between snatches of sleep, we picture Lawson watching the black shapes of the night as the carriages moved on and past.

The train then progressed onward through the western slopes. Wallerawang: did Lawson feel a tinge of homesickness as he watched the passengers alight for the branch rail line to Mudgee? "In a Dry Season" describes Lawson's trip. It was published in the *Bulletin* on November 5 of that year.

Slop sac suits, red faces, and old-fashioned, flat-brimmed hats, with wire round the brims, begin to drop into the train on the other side of Bathurst; and here and there a hat with three inches of crape [sic - crepe] round the crown, which perhaps signifies death in the family at some remote date, and perhaps doesn't. Sometimes, I believe, it only means grease under the band. I notice that when a bushman puts crape round his hat he generally leaves it there till the hat wears out, or another friend dies. In the latter case, he buys a new piece of crape. This outward sign of bereavement usually has a jolly face beneath it. Death is about the only cheerful thing in the bush.

Millthorpe. Orange. Stuart Town. Swinging lamps sent shadows darting along almost-deserted platforms. Hollow, night-time voices called "all-aboard".

After Dubbo the air warmed, but was not yet hot. It was daylight now and Lawson eagerly unlocked the catch and pushed up the window. He inhaled the wonderful mystical fragrance of the bush. Cinders flew from the engine as the steady chuffing of the train drew him further into the real outback. He scribbled rapidly in a notebook, transferring images, smells and sounds into words.

The railway towns consist of a public house and a general store, with a square tank and a school-house on piles in the nearer distance. The tank stands at the end of the school and is not many times smaller than the building itself. It is safe to call the pub "The Railway Hotel", and the store "The Railway Stores", with an "s". A couple of patient, ungroomed hacks are probably standing outside the pub, while their masters are inside having a drink — several drinks. Also, it's safe to draw a sundowner sitting listlessly on a bench on the verandah, reading the Bulletin.

The Railway Stores seem to exist only in the shadow of the pub, and it is impossible to conceive either as being independent of the other. There is sometimes a small, oblong weather-board building — unpainted, and generally leaning in one of the eight possible directions, and perhaps with a twist in another — which, from its half-obliterated sign, seems to have started as a rival to the Railway Stores; but the shutters are up and the place empty.

The only town I saw that differed much from the above consisted of a box-bark humpy with a clay chimney, and a woman standing at the door throwing out the wash-up water.

By way of variety, the artist might make a water-colour sketch of a fettler's tent on the line, with a billy hanging over the fire in front, and three fettlers standing round filling their pipes...

We crossed the Macquarie — a narrow, muddy gutter with a dog swimming across, and three goats interested.

A little further on we saw the first sundowner. He carried a Royal Alfred,* and had a billy in one hand and a stick in the other. He was dressed in a tail-coat turned yellow, a print shirt, and a pair of moleskin trousers, with big, square calico patches on the knees; and his old straw hat was covered with calico. Suddenly he slipped his swag, dropped his billy, and ran forward, boldly flourishing the stick.. I thought that he was mad, and was about to attack the train, but he wasn't; he was only killing a snake.

* Royal Alfred - type of swag

The train rattled across the countryside and was finally out onto the western plains. It slowed and eventually stopped at each small township along the way: Narromine, Trangie, Nevertire.

Somebody told me that the country was very dry on the other side of Nevertire. It is. I wouldn't like to sit down on it anywhere. The least horrible spot in the bush, in a dry season, is where the bush isn't — where it has been cleared away and a green crop is trying to grow. They talk of settling people on the land! Better settle in it. I'd rather settle on the water; at least, until some gigantic system of irrigation is perfected in the West.

The land flattened out and the trees were sparse, sometimes only existing as a ragged line on the horizon. Nyngan. Girilambone. Coolibah. Byrock. At Byrock Lawson saw "a splendid-looking black tracker in a masher uniform and a pair of Wellington boots." There was also a group of shearers who, although shabbily dressed, carried an air of independence about them.

About Byrock we met the bush liar in all his glory. He was dressed like — like a bush larrikin. His name was Jim. He had been to a ball where some blank had "touched" his blanky overcoat. The overcoat had a cheque for ten "quid" in the pocket. He didn't seem to feel the loss much. "Wot's ten quid?" He'd been everywhere, including the Gulf country. He still had three or four sheds to go to. He had telegrams in his pockets from half a dozen squatters and supers offering him pens on any terms. He didn't give a blank whether he took them or no. He thought at first he had the telegrams on him but found he had left them in the pocket of the overcoat aforesaid. He had learned butchering in a day. He was a bit of a scrapper himself and talked a lot about the ring. At the last station where he shore he gave the super the father of a hiding. The super was a big chap, about six-foot-three, and had knocked out Paddy Somebody in one round. He worked with a man who shore four hundred sheep in nine hours.

Here a quiet-looking bushman in a corner of the carriage grew restless, and presently he opened his mouth and took the liar down in about three minutes.

During the late afternoon of 21 September, Lawson's train left the scrubland some thirteen miles [twenty kilometres] from Bourke and passed over the treeless flood plain of the Darling River basin. In Lawson's own words from the poem "Sweeney", which was published in the *Bulletin* on 16 December 1893, "it was somewhere in September, and the sun was going down, when I came in search of "copy", to a Darling-River town".

Finally the township of Bourke came into view, firstly the stock trucking yards a little out of town, alongside which could be seen the skeletal beginnings of the Bourke Meat Preserving Company's buildings which were under construction. Late afternoon sunlight reflected on galvanised-iron roofs. Lawson remembered:

At 5.30 we saw a long line of camels moving out across the sunset. There's something snaky about camels. They remind me of turtles and goannas. Somebody said, "Here's Bourke."

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The book is now out of print, but you may be lucky enough to pick one up on e-Bay.