

By John McLaren

This paper is in most ways a mere footnote to Brian Matthews' book on Lawson, The Receding Wave (Melbourne University Press, 1972), and it assumes the main arguments of that work: that Lawson's imagination was gripped partly by his early childhood experience but particularly by his shocked apprehension of the realities of the outback which he encountered on his trip to Bourke in 1892, and that the decline in the quality of his later work is due to his exhaustion of this subject matter and to innate artistic flaws rather than to external causes such as his alcoholism. I have also adopted a suggestion offered by Brian Kiernan at an ASAL conference in Brisbane some years ago that Lawson's bushman represents a kind of Australian ideal, a standard offered to criticise the present at the very moment that economic depression is destroying the reality on which it was based and driving selectors from the land into the city.

In this paper I want to examine the nature of this ideal. The genesis of the paper came when I was rereading Lawson to prepare an introductory lecture and was struck by the extent to which his stories represent an unrelieved catalogue of misery and disaster. This was noted by some of his first reviewers, who tended to reject the unrelieved pessimism of his work. Yet from the first his stories seem to have struck a sympathetic chord among his readers - in the first year of publication While the Billy Boils had sold 7000 copies and had gone through several editions (1).

Even those critics who commented on his bleak view praised his stories for their truth to experience. John Farrell, in an enthusiastic review of While the Billy Boils in the Sydney Daily Telegraph, commented that "no book could be more unmistakeably the product of experience and observation". Fred. J. Bloomfield, in the Australian Workman, referred to Lawson as "the poet, the prophet, the singer" of "the genuine Australia: the Australia of the sheep station and the cattle run; the Australia of the miner, the selector, the fossicker, the rouseabout, the seaman, the sundowner, the Murrumbidgee whaler - in short, that dear old Australia, with the weird fatalistic charms for those whose feet have worn graves for their owners while trudging along for weary leagues, for hopeless years, the wallaby track which ends only in the Never Never Land", and if he recognized the "squalid, the sordid, the wretchedness and the repulsiveness of the starved soul as of the starved body" which makes much of the content, he sees Lawson's world as also "shot through and through with a lightning gleam of hopeless human brotherhood." David G. Ferguson, who worried that the work suffered from "a very pronounced and narrow restriction in the choice of material" acknowledged that he knew of "no writer who has dealt with this phase of our life on anything like the same scale, with anything like the same truth and vigour." Even critics such as Price Waring who felt Lawson's work lacked Art praised it for its truth to Australian experience: "For when the sketches have not the artistic worth of a picture, they have, at least, the value of a cleverly executed photograph"; "We are moved by them because we breathe their atmosphere, are familiar with

their persons and scenes . . . But as Art it lacks perspective".  
(2).

Yet in praising the realism of Lawson's sketches, the critics are themselves contributing to the same myth of the "real Australia", as Bloomfield called it. I would suggest that it is this mythic quality, drawing its power from a nostalgia for a time when, whatever the misery and hardship, men could fulfil their true selves in an elemental struggle with nature, that gave Lawson's work its popular appeal.

Before examining the nature of this appeal more closely, however, we need to recognize the ambivalence of Lawson's own attitude to the bush. 'The City Bushman', for example, contains some of his most scathing criticism of the city writer's idealization of the bush:

True, the bush "hath moods and changes" - and the bushman hath 'em,  
too,

For he's not a poet's dummy - he's a man, the same as you;

But his back is growing rounder - slaving for the absentee -

And his toiling wife is thinner than a country wife should be.

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;

And, in short, we think the bushman's being driven to the wall.

And it's doubtful if his spirit will be "loyal thro' it all."

(p.112)

Yet, after much more similar criticism of the bush and the bushmen, he can still finish his verses with the following:

You'll admit that Up-the-Country, more especially in drought

Isn't quite the Eldorado that the poets rave about,  
Yet at times we long to gallop where the reckless bushman rides  
In the wake of startled brumbies that are flying for their hides;  
Long to feel the saddle tremble once again between our knees  
And to hear the stockwhips rattle just like rifles in the trees!  
Long to feel the bridle-leather tugging strongly in the hand  
And to feel once more a little like a native of the land. . .

(p.116)

True, this is verse, not the prose in which the view is both bleaker and more specific. There is little joy in feeling "like a native of the land" many of the sketches which deal with the realities of life on the land. The mood of all of them could be summed up in one of the items from 'Some Popular Australian Mistakes': "There are no "mountains" out West; only ridges on the floors of hell." Yet even in these the harshness is tempered with some humour which hints at another possibility. The garrulousness of the two selectors in 'A Day on a Selection' suggests that the whole sketch is a comic exaggeration for the sake of the city reader, and similarly both 'Hungerford' and 'In a Wet Season' have some of the feeling of a tall story. There is a kind of perverse pride in knowing just how hellish life can be.

Yet 'Popular Australian Mistakes' also introduces two other themes. First, there is the notion of the shearers as a kind of labor aristocracy, "the men of the West", who despise station hands as "mostly crawlers to the boss" (p.128). Second, the zeal with which he exposes the fallacies about the bush is motivated by a

reforming ambition, the hope that "by describing it as it really is, we might do some good for the lost souls there" (p.130).

Before considering the nature of Lawson's bushman, it is necessary to draw some further distinctions about the bush itself. Lawson uses the word 'bush' to refer to at least three different kinds of country. (3)

First, there are the older settlements, the scene of the struggles of selectors with squatter and landscape which provide the subject matter of the greater part of his best writing, including the embryonic novel of the Joe Wilson sequence. This is the world of his childhood and consequently is characterised by misery and loathing. He describes it in 'Crime in the Bush':

. . . there are hundreds of out-of-the-way places in Australia - hidden away in unheard of "pockets" in the ranges; on barren creeks (abandoned by pioneering farmers and pastoralists "moving up country" half a century ago); up at the ends of long dark gullies, and away out on God-forsaken "box", native apple, or stringy-bark flats - where families live for generations in mental darkness almost inconceivable in this enlightened age and country. They are often in a worse condition mentally than savages to the manner born . . . Some of these families are descended from a convict of the worst type on one side or the other, perhaps on both; and, if not born criminals, are trained in shady ways from childhood. Conceived and bred under the shadow of exile, hardship, or "trouble", the sullen, brooding spirit which enwraps their lonely bush-buried homes will carry further their moral degradation . . .

The reference to convict ancestry here points to a determinism in Lawson's view of human nature, and later in the same essay we encounter the idea, which was to be a potent source of his own self-pity, that a few choice souls are born for something better. Perhaps the cruellest of all the bad sights of the bush is the case of the child born to a family with which it has nothing in common mentally (possibly physically) - the "throw back" to original and better stock - whose bright mind is slowly but surely warped to madness by the conditions of life under which the individual is expected to be contented and happy.

(p.214)

Yet alongside this unremittingly bleak view we can find other sketches in which precisely these areas produce his ideal bushman. Thus we read in 'Going Blind'

He was the typical bushman, not one of those tall, straight, wiry, brown men from the West, but from the old Selection Districts, where many drovers came from, and of the old bush school; one of those slight active little fellows whom we used to see in cabbage-tree hats, Crimean shirts, strapped trousers and elastic side boots - "larstins" they called them. They could dance well; sing indifferently, and mostly through their noses, the old bush songs; play the concertina horribly; and ride like - like - well, they could ride.

(pp.163-64)

The stories thus reassure the bush reader that the writer understands the miserable reality of their lives, but also that he recognizes them, whatever he may think of their neighbours, as

truly the salt of the earth. We should note, however, that this particular bush exists mainly as background for the men - they settle on the land but are driven from it, leaving the women and children to endure its rigours. The second kind of bush is the world of "The Roaring Days" - the vision of Australia when it was still a land of promise, before the "iron rails" of progress had "tethered" it to the rest of the world. There is an incidental irony in the fact that it was only the coming of the "iron rails" which, by making wheat production economic, was eventually to make possible the dream of a countryside of independent farmers in the hope of which so many lives, including those of Lawson's father and his neighbours, had been sacrificed. But that was in the future, and for Lawson there was only present depression and past glory:

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Then stately ships came sailing

From every harbour's mouth,

And sought the land of promise

That beacons in the South;

Then southward streamed their streamers

And swelled their canvas full

To speed the wildest dreamers

E'er borne in vessel's hull.

The rough bush roads re-echoed

The bar-room's noisy din,

When troops of stalwart horsemen

Dismounted at the inn.

. . . .

And when the cheery camp-fire

Explored the bush with gleams

The camping grounds were crowded

With caravans of teams;

Then home the jests were driven,

And good old songs were sung,

And choruses were given

The strength of heart and lung.

Oh, they were lion-hearted

Who gave our country birth!

Oh, they were of the stoutest sons

From all the lands on earth!

. . . .

But golden days are vanished,

And altered is the scene;

The diggings are deserted,

The camping grounds are green;

The flaunting flag of progress

Is in the West unfurled,

The mighty bush with iron rails

Is tethered to the world.

(pp.78-79)

The scenes described are not those of Lawson's own childhood but those of a generation earlier, which he would have known about only from his father and his father's mates, the old diggers who called



in on the selection and reminisced about times when they and the world were young. Their romanticized memories, contrasting with a harsh present, served to establish Lawson's feeling of himself as a child born out of his time. Old gold-diggers recur constantly in his prose, whether as figures from the past, as in 'An Old Mate of Your Father's', or as people left over in the present, like Dave Regan and his party in 'The Loaded Dog', or Joe Wilson himself, who remarks that "whenever I made a few pounds I'd sink a shaft somewhere, prospecting for gold" (pp.282-83). These later diggers, always hoping for something to turn up, blend into the character of the feckless husband, as is emphasised by Joe's added comment that "Mary never let me rest till she talked me out of that". Nevertheless, these are the men who populate his third bush - the Outback proper. The Outback, the West, or the Never Never is the third bush in Lawson's work, the bush that took possession of his imagination on his trip to Bourke (4). This world, which he frequently refers to as the "real bush", is where his shearers and drovers belong. The hardships of their life on the track create the qualities which he celebrates as 'mateship' and idealizes as the basis of the creed of "unionism and democracy". The ideal is given in the hard-bitten Mitchell or, more sentimentally, in Bob Brothers of 'Send Round the Hat'. Yet, for all their strengths, these men are failures. They are the selectors who have left home to earn much-needed money, and then just gone on drifting, like the absent husband of 'The Drover's Wife', Spicer of 'Water Them Geraniums', or Joe Wilson as he looks back on his courtship and marriage. They are men who have lost their future and now have

only the harsh realities of the present and regrets for a failed past..

In his introduction to the Portable Australian Authors selection of Lawson's writing Brian Kiernan attributes the success of Lawson's best work to its realism. Brian Matthews similarly argues that his work reaches its height in the Joe Wilson sequence, where the bush is not so much the subject matter as the environment in which Lawson can study the change from innocence to experience, with the growing alienation the latter entails. The realism of this understanding of the losses effected by time is, he argues, overtaken in the later work by a sentimental regret for lost possibilities, for "the men we might have been". Yet realism alone is not sufficient to account for the popular appeal of a body of work which presents a picture of such unremitting harshness, in which the only occasions of hope belong with a generation which has gone or to the early days of marriages which have already failed. If Australians, and particularly bush Australians, saw themselves in these sketches they must have found something other than a reminder of their own losing battles against unbeatable odds.

I would suggest that the key to Lawson's appeal lies in the nostalgia which permeates the realism. This nostalgia enables him to combine realism with romanticism even in his harshest work, and is present equally in his prose and his verse. Thus, the excitement of a ballad like 'The Roaring Days' can be set against the realism of 'The Teams', but even this song of endurance and cruelty concludes with a note of triumph:

And thus with little of joy or rest

Are the long, long journeys done;  
And thus - 'tis a cruel war at the best -  
Is distance fought in the mighty West,  
And the lonely battles won.

(p.79)

Similarly, in 'The Drover's Wife' the misery of isolation is balanced by the strength of the wife and the spontaneous affection shown by "the dirty-legged boy" at the end, but this again is undercut as mother and son "sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush." (p.103) By qualifying the dawn as "sickly" Lawson reminds us that the victory which has been won is by no means final, but he still leaves allows the conclusion to rest in a nostalgic moment of achieved unity. Even the disintegration and death of Mrs Spicer in "Water Them Geraniums", and the foreshadowing of Mary's own fate, are set against Mary's compassion and nurturing strength and, in the following story, the momentary success she and Joe achieve with their crop and the double buggy. Thus the reader can recognize and accept the hardship because it is set in the past, while there is still the occasional victory and the hope of eventual success.

Lawson's nostalgic appeal to the past is similar to that which Synge makes in The Aran Islands. Discussing this work in 'A Note on Nostalgia', D.W.Harding suggests that the individual turns to the past for sanction when he finds that his deepest concerns are not shared by the contemporary group of which he is a member. "Nostalgia expresses a dissatisfaction with the [contemporary] group - its total absence in a writer suggests

complacency, its indulgence is to cut oneself from the possibilities of group life." (5) In retreating to the Aran Islands, Synge was searching for the kind of community he found lacking in the urban society of his time. Similarly, Lawson, in returning to the bush of his childhood and early manhood, is searching for an independence which was lacking in his own life and denied by city in which he lived. But whereas Synge recognized that the community of the Aran Islands was ultimately inadequate to support his complex responses to it, Lawson indulges his nostalgia to an extent that comes perilously close to what Harding describes as a longing for death as a release. Moreover, whereas the values of Synge's island community have been created through the work of generations, and thus implicitly could be renewed in the work of an urban society, Lawson's bush independence has never existed except as an aspiration. His hope is only that of the foundling who dreams that he will ultimately be restored to his rightful place, rather than that of the settler who will make it (6). As he writes in 'Brighten's Sister-in-Law',

I was fighting hard then - struggling for something better. Both Mary and I were born for better things, and that's what made the life so hard for us.

(p.280)

The past tense of the whole Joe Wilson sequence reinforces the sense of inevitable failure. The essence of the nostalgic appeal is therefore as justification for those who have failed, for Mitchell and Joe Wilson's many mates, rather than to a tradition which, to cite Harding again, could deepen the individual's sense

of himself in the present.

This sense of nostalgia is implicit in even the harshest of Lawson's stories. The pivot of the Joe Wilson sequence is the two-part story 'Water Them Geraniums'. In the first part, 'A Lonely Track', we hear how Joe first takes Mary to their selection at Lahey's Creek. The early part of the story is full of reminders of how husband and wife have drifted apart, and of forebodings of the eventual failure of both selection and marriage. Then, in the bare surroundings of the hut which is their new home, they quarrel, and Joe walks out into the bush and down towards the neighbouring selection. There he sees Mrs Spicer's even more wretched hut and hears her calling on one of her boys to ride over and see whether the newcomers need any meat and on her daughter to "water them geraniums" - "a few dirty grey-green leaves behind some sticks against the bark wall near the door" - Mrs Spicer's pathetic attempt to preserve some element of civilization. With a shudder he realizes that "this was what Mary would come to if I left her here" (p.305).

In the second part of the story, ' "Past Carin' " ', Lawson fills in the details of Mrs Spicer's life - the morose husband, usually absent, the son leaving home to find work and the son in trouble with the police, the encounter with a traveller in the horrors and his subsequent suicide, the attempts to smarten the hut up for visitors, and the constant battle to wrest a bare existence from nature. The story ends with Mrs Spicer's release in death, but her shadow lies heavy across the momentary success Joe and Mary enjoy in the final story in the sequence, 'A Double Buggy at

Lahey's Creek'.

There seems little room for nostalgia in this tale of unrelenting hardship leading to breakdown, madness and death, yet in fact the chronicle is made endurable for the reader not only by the shafts of comedy which throw into contrast the darker elements but mainly by the fact that it is narrated from the comparative if fugitive security of the Wilson home, presided over not by the ineffectual Joe but by the competent and compassionate Mary. The first paragraphs of the story describe the possessions with which they move to their selection. Although sparse, the possessions - waggon and spring cart, cattle, bedstead, table and chairs, pots and pans, sewing machine, ornaments, cradle, dog, cat and chooks - are sufficient to establish the image of a home. Further, while Joe and Mary may be trapped by the hardship of the bush, they do not really belong in it. Joe insists that they had both been born to "better things", and that "I was not fit to "go on the land". The place was only fit for some stolid German, or Scotsman, or even Englishman and his wife, who had no ambition but to bullock and make a farm of the place. I had only drifted here through carelessness, brooding and discontent." (p.305) Even Mrs Spicer "had been used to table-napkins at one time in her life" (p.317). The effect of these details is to direct the reader's attention from the desperate harshness of the setting to the romantic dream of settlement which the hardship destroys.

Joe himself is portrayed as a weak man who nevertheless is somehow superior to the circumstances which eventually conspire to destroy him. Although he bitterly regrets the stubborn pride which

led him to ignore Mary's feelings until it was too late, the marriage had failed and Mary was dead, Joe sees himself as the victim of circumstances rather than of his own weaknesses:

I thought of my early boyhood, of the hard life of "grubbin" and "milkin" and "fencin" and "bloughin" and "ring-barkin", etc., and all for nothing. The few months at the little bark school, with a teacher who couldn't spell. The cursed ambition or craving that tortured my soul as a boy - ambition or craving for - I didn't know what for! For something better and brighter, anyhow. And I made the life harder by reading at night.

(p.300)

The summary parallels the account Lawson gives of his own youth in 'A Fragment of Autobiography', and there is the same sense that sensitivity, the temperament of the poet, incapacitates for normal life. This is carried further in the quarrel between Joe and Mary, when Joe reveals that there is literally nowhere for him to make a life with Mary - Gulgong, the town, is too miserable, the selection is too isolated, and in Sydney he will destroy himself with drink. He is already fated to become one of the travelling bush workers with a failed past and no hope in either present or future. But the odds are set just too much against him, so that the effect is not one of tragedy in which a man is overwhelmed by a fatal combination of circumstances but of pathos, the spectacle of a man who is unable to cope with any circumstances. Again, this shifts the emphasis of the story from the realism of the life portrayed to an indulgence in childhood dreams.

Although the Joe Wilson sequence provides Lawson's most

prolonged study of the failure of the selectors which eventually drove them outback and into the last refuge of mateship, he had already limned the type in 'The Drover's Wife', who could be Mrs Spicer in an earlier period of her marriage. He writes of her husband:

He is careless, but a good enough husband . . . He may forget sometimes, but if he has a good cheque when he comes back he will give most of it to her.

(p.99)

This is Spicer as he once was, Joe Wilson as he must become. The irresponsibility is shrugged off in the name of carelessness. It is the bushman as he would like to see himself. Nothing matters - it cannot, because there is nothing anyone can do about a world of such despair that the only remedy left to its inhabitants is for the women to put out their little bits of remaining finery for visitors or Sundays, and for the men to indulge in pointless political debate or sentimental reminiscence of childhood, marriage, or the "roaring days" that have now turned to bitterness.

The power of Lawson's bush stories comes, then, not merely from their realism, their success in creating a world recognized by its readers as their own, but from the mythic element which combines this harsh realism with nostalgic dreams of security and hope. The "roaring days" are one image of hope; childhood suggests this security but is cruelly thwarted by poverty or the insensitivity of adults. His bushwomen learn endurance and courage from their circumstances, but the only value created by his men is