

Henry Lawson and the Bush Myth

'We are, and always have been, two people in one - a race of Europeans exiled from their own mainstream of development, yet carrying on that stream within themselves, and a race different in themselves because their environment and their influences are different.'

Judith Wright, Preoccupations in Australian Poetry,
Melbourne, 1965, p.1.

The work of Henry Lawson represents one of the two possible responses by Australians to their situation. One response, the internationalist, is to recognize that Australia is culturally provincial, incapable of sustaining an independent culture in the manner of metropolitan centres. The internationalist sees the work of the Australian writer as belonging within the broad stream of the English literary tradition, and judges it by the standards of that tradition. The Australian work is significant only to the extent that it rises above its purely local concerns and contributes to our general understanding of man. The setting is important only ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ in the symbolic sense, adding, as it might in one of Thomas Hardy's novels, to our sense of the nature of man's life. The nationalist, on the other hand, sees the setting, the particular nature of life in Australia, as the central fact of Australian literature. He sees all life as controlled by particular circumstance, and therefore sees the value of Australian writing in its exploration of the Australian experience. Work is to be judged not by its supposed interest to readers remote from the life depicted, but by its contribution ~~of~~ to our understanding of ourselves. At its best, this approach leads to a freshness in appraising what is valuable; at its worst, ~~when~~ ^{through} a correlation of the distinctive with the worthwhile, it can lead to ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ mere parochialism. In judging Lawson we must recognize that his own concern is with what is distinctively Australian, and that as a consequence he alters our perception of the possibilities of life in Australia. Whether we accept or reject him, we can ignore him only at the peril of ignoring the condition of our own lives in Australia. Yet in attending to him we need to be aware that he works in a larger tradition than the Australian, and consequently we must judge his contribution to this tradition by the wider perceptions which it makes available, lest we reduce the possibilities of our lives to that which is distinctive. To ignore him or inflate him is to be parochial, bound by the restrictions of our own environment. Single-minded dedication to the Australian is an inflation of its importance, a refusal to accept it as part of a larger whole; rejection is an equally blinkered attempt to be what we are not. We are not at the centre of a metropolitan culture, but provincial. We take from the main culture and we can contribute to it, but we cannot ignore it, as it can, if it chooses, ignore us. In giving special attention to our own arts in a wider context we are therefore looking after our own proper concerns.

Perhaps the most important historical and geographic fact about Australia is that we are, and throughout the period of white settlement always have been, an urban society. A.D.Hope, in writing of her cities, -

. . . . ^{like} five teeming sores
Each drains her, a vast parasite robber-state
Where second-hand Europeans puliulate
Timidly on the eduge of alien shores

- is merely repeating the earlier observation and prejudice of Joseph Furphy. Yet it was the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ editors and publishers in these cities who took over the image of the bushman from the earlier balladists and, through the work of Patterson, Lawson and their followers, converted it into an image of the essential Australian. The question is what there is about this image which has made it so appealing to Australian readers.

The most obvious characteristic of Lawson's bush is its ~~xxxxxx~~ dreariness. A.A.Phillips has remarked that scarcely an inch of rain falls in the whole of Lawson's stories. When we do find water, it is likely to be in the form of the ^{flooded creek} ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ which prevents Harry Dale's homecoming, or the drenching downpour which hides the fugitives in 'wanted by the Police'. Yet despite the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ gloom, the despair, the attributes of hell with which Lawson fills his bush, it is only here that he seems properly at home. The despair may be real, but the reality is somehow comforting. The comfort is of course easiest in the companionship of the defeated in bush shanty or traveller's hut, but even in a story as grim as 'The Drover's Wife' or 'A Child in the Dark' there is a sense of familiarity to ease the pain. The stories are pathetic, but never tragic, because defeat is assumed from the start. The interest of the writing is therefore in studying how individuals meet the fact of defeat. Yet by meeting it on its own terms, by not hoping for too much, they paradoxically achieve the kind of victory won by the drover's wife when her son exclaims - falsely, we know, but sincerely "Mother, I won't never go drovin'; blarst me if I do." We recognize the aspiration towards security at the same time that we acknowledge its futility.

The quality we recognize in Lawson is his acceptance of the countryside as the place where his aspirations must be worked out. Earlier writers had attempted to romanticize or mythologize the land, and so their writing still seems strange. Like the earlier artists, they see the landscape through European eyes, and consequently their work now reads strangely. It is writing which in its anxiety to be at home with the exotic finishes up belonging nowhere. We see this particularly in the colonial poets, Harpur and Kendall. In his 'Creek of the Four Graves', Harpur is determined to emphasize the magnificence of the scenery, the terror and heroism of his theme.

Here halting wearied now the sun was set,
 Our travellers kindled for their first night's camp
 A brisk and crackling fire, which seemed to them
 A wilder creature than 'twas elsewhere wont,
 Because of the surrounding savageness.
 And as they supped, birds of new shape and plume
 And strange wild voice came by, and up the steep
 Between the climbing forest growths they saw
 Perched on the bare aboutments of the hills,
 Where haply ~~xx~~ yet some lingering gleam fell through,
 The wallaroo look forth. Eastward at last

The glow was wasted into formless gloom . . .
 As has been noticed elsewhere, the passage is influenced by Wordsworth, but the intent is very different, at least from Wordsworth at his best. Certainly, it shares with, say, Peter Bell the determination to make the reader attend even to the humble people, and to emphasize the contrast of puny man and mighty nature. But where in 'Peter Bell' nature acts as a judge of man, or in the 'Prelude' gives a strength by which man can rise beyond his limitations, here it is presented just as the setting for great adventure. The poet is determined to show this scenery as being as full of beauty, as worthy of our attention, as the scenery of English poetry, ~~xxx~~ His words serve to assimilate it into this ~~English~~ tradition - 'Here halting wearied now' has echoes of Milton's heroic action; the hill where 'haply yet some lingering gleam fell through' belongs in the lake district; the formless gloom has the vague apprehension of Wordsworth's spirit of nature without its purpose.

It is not that the description is necessarily inaccurate, but that the words attend to themselves instead of to the scene. Harpur can see only that which is sanctioned by a foreign tradition. From this tradition he meticulously selects the apt phrase, - 'the massing woods/ . . . A deep dusk loveliness, lay ridged and heaped,/ only the more distinctly for their shade' is both affecting and precise - but the words serve to alienate the scene, to put it into a gilt frame, not to use it as something familiar, or even to familiarize it to us. The wallaroo in the earlier passage focusses the strangeness which is in the mind of the reader and the poet rather than inherent in the scene itself.