

Louis Stone

(21 October 1871-23 September 1935)

John McLaren

Victoria University of Technology

BOOKS

Jonah (London: Methuen, 1911; Sydney: Endeavour Press, 1933);
republished as Larrikin ^{New York:} (US: Long & Smith, 1933); second
Australian edition (Allied Authors and Artists, Sydney, 1945);
third Australian edition (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965).

Betty Wayside (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1915; unexpurgated
serial version, Lone Hand, Sydney, July 1913-August 1914.

Plays:

'The Lap of the Gods' (Sydney: Daily Telegraph, 12 daily
episodes from 2 to 15 May, 1923).

'The Watch that Wouldn't Go' (Sydney: Triad, November, 1926.

Stories:

'A Case of Biliousness' (Sydney: Norman Lindsay's Book No. 2,
1915).

'Fate and Mrs Fortescue' (Sydney: The Australian Soldier's Gift

Book, edited by Ethel Turner and Bertram Stevens, 1917).

Essay.

'On Being Fat' (Sydney: Bookfellow, 1 January 19120.

BIRTH: Leicester, UK, 21 October 1871.

Although Louis Stone formed his literary ambitions early and pursued them through most of his life, his significance depends on one novel, Jonah, which he published in 1911. Although not the first Australian urban novel, it is the first to make power in the streets, homes, shops and markets of the city its major theme. Its literary quality comes not only from its almost cinematic descriptions of social reality, but for its symbolic use of urban imagery to represent the nature of good and evil in a secular world.

Louis Stone (William Louis [Lewis] Stone) was born in Leicester, UK, 21 October 1871. The son of William Stone, who had been a member of the Royal Marines, he was taken with his family to Queensland in 1884. After a few months in Brisbane, the family moved to the Sydney, where they lived for a time in Redfern, the working class inner-Sydney suburb where the eponymous central character of Jonah was to have his bootshop. The Stone family lived over the shop of a bootmaker, and for a time Louis Stone worked either for him as an errand boy or in another boot factory. In 1888 he entered the New South Wales

Department of Public Instruction as a pupil-teacher, giving his religion as "agnostic".

Stone, despite his attempts to become a professional writer, was to remain a teacher until his retirement through ill-health in 1931. As a pupil-teacher he taught at Macquarie Street, in the city, and Waterloo, and despite reprimands for breaches of discipline passed three promotion examinations and in 1893 was granted a half-pay scholarship to Fort Street [Teachers] Training School. In the same year he matriculated to Arts at Sydney University, where he successfully studied French, English, Latin and Geometry over two years but left before completing a degree. He also passed Physics and Science electives, but failed Trigonometry and a subject called Arithmetic and Algebra. During 1895 he had short-term appointments at various inner-suburban schools around Sydney, and finally passed his outstanding mathematics subjects and was able to become a permanent classified teacher.

Although Stone's permanent teaching career began in the country, first at Cootamundra and then at Wagga Wagga in south-central New South Wales, his interests and aspirations remained urban. In 1897 he obtained temporary appointments in the city, but was back in Wagga Wagga in 1900 and Cootamundra in 1901, when he was officially censured for misleading the Department in his attempts to return to the city. In 1901 and 1902 he had the first of the periods of intermittent sick leave that were to characterize the rest of his career. He finally returned to the city in 1904, and married Abigail Allen, a teacher and pianist, in 1908. Most of his teaching was at Coogee, the northern beachside suburb, where he rose to Acting Principal. For a brief

time in 1921 he was transferred to Sydney Boys High School, but returned to Coogee after an Inspector's report that he described as 'spiteful' and 'malicious'. The Department promoted him to Class IB on the basis of his literary achievements, and without requiring him to sit for the usual examination. The earlier essays he wrote for them were described by the examiners as "witty, concise, lucid" and "acute and useful".

Stone appears to have started writing his major novel, Jonah, either during his time in the country or on one of the intervals he spent in Sydney. He said that it began as a short story, and that he had spent fifteen years working on it. After his return to Sydney he spent four years walking around the districts where its action occurs, taking detailed notes of what he saw. He objected however to its being described as a realist novel, telling John Ladeveze that he considered realism "totally opposed to his interpretation of life". The novel seems to have taken its present shape when, one night on his wanderings, he saw through a lighted window a hunchbacked cobbler bent at work over his last. This glimpse gave him his central character, Jonah Jones, the hunchback who used his handicap to assert himself first as leader of the Push of young larrikins who terrorised the streets of inner Sydney. The other characters he described as composites of people he had known, except for Mrs Yabsley, Jonah's mother-in-law, who he claimed as "myself in disguise".

The novel falls into two parts. In the first, Jonah is leader of the Push, the gang of eighteen to twenty-five year old men who gather nightly "under the veranda at the corner of Cardigan Street, smoking cigarettes and discussing the weightier matters of life--horses and women". Their chief occupation is

"to guy the pedestrians, leaping from insult to swift retaliation if one resented their foul comments." The dark side of their activities, which is hinted at in this opening scene by their taunting of the Salvation Army, manifests itself in the later scene where they hunt as a pack to capture and kick almost to death a drunken bricklayer they believe has betrayed one of their mates to the police.

As his pursuers gained on him he gave a hoarse scream-- the dolorous cry of a hunted animal.

. . .

As he turned into Abercrombie Street, Chook ran level with him, then stooped swiftly and caught his ankle. The bricklayer went sprawling, and in an instant the Push closed in on the fallen man as footballers form a scrum, kicking the struggling body with silent ferocity, drunk with the primeval instinct to destroy. (pp.37-38)

Although the violence here is realistic as a portrayal of the ways of the larrikin pushes, its importance in the novel is as a thematic counterpoint to the security of home and love that is represented, against great odds, by Mrs Yabsley, and that even Jonah and his offsider, or lieutenant, Chook, eventually seek. The action of the first part of the novel concerns their taming to marriage, by love of woman on Chook's part, through love of his baby on Jonah's. Jonah's wedding party, provided by Mrs Yabsley for the Push and her neighbours in the street, is the highpoint of the conviviality which for a time defeats the brutality symbolized both by the Push and by the opening scene in

the markets that sets the tone for the book. Here the crowd that "flung itself on the shops, bent on plunder" and the butcher's shop with its carcasses "gutted and skewered like victims for sacrifice" represents the violence that is manifest in the Push but underlies even the conviviality that Mrs Yabsley endeavours to establish.

This violence takes a different form in the second part of the novel, as Jonah ruthlessly uses the talents that made him leader of the Push to carve a successful career as businessman. As a counterpoint, Chook and his wife, Pinkie, build a modest success on love and a fair helping of luck. Whereas Jonah's obsession with himself, broken only by his occasional escape into music, thwarts his satisfaction, destroys those around him, and leaves him with only material success, Chook and Jonah achieve the conviviality to which Mrs Yabsley aspires.

Mrs Yabsley is Stone in disguise only if we accept Jonah as the nightmare embodiment of his father, the tough marine. Stone himself, "tall, lank, dyspeptic Lou, with his tragically depressed eyes and fastidiously tormented mind" (Lindsay), and constant ill-health, was closer physically to Hans Paasch, the benefactor that Jonah eventually drove to poverty and ruin. Mrs Yabsley has the vigor that Stone himself lacked to sustain the spirit of conviviality and solidarity to which the novel aspires.

Jonah was published by Methuen in 1911 and favorable but unenthusiastic reviews, and went out of print after two printings and sales of some 1400 before remainders. In the remainder of his life he published only one more novel, , an essay, two plays and two short stories.

The novel, Betty Wayside (1915), is a light romance

distinguished for its sketches of life in a rather more genteel, lower-middle class Sydney on the fringes of Bohemia, and its affectionate regard for music, in which both Stone and his wife were proficient. His first play, The Pal of the Gods, won second prize in a competition run by the Sydney Daily Telegraph, which published it in 1923. Stone took it with him to London in 1923, where it was read and commended by John Galsworthy, who also successfully proposed Stone for membership of the Society of Authors. His trip however met with no other success, and the play received its only production in 1928, when Gregan McMahon presented it for a one week during a season of Australian plays at Sydney's Palace Theatre. Although its season of one week was reasonable for the time, it received mixed reviews and McMahon abandoned his enterprise. The play is a rather heavy-handed satire in a prologue and twelve episodes, during which members of a party of British tourists in Greece unwittingly do honour to Hermes, who is seeking from the Father of the Gods a return to the golden age when humans "had reverence for thy gift of life, and wisdom to interpret thy laws." Predictably, he grants the tourists their dearest wishes, and equally predictably they waste them. His other play, a one-acter called The Watch Wouldn't Go, was published in the Sydney Triad in 1926.

Stone's Jonah was republished by P.R.Stephensen's Endeavour Press in Sydney in 1933, and as Larrikin in the USA in the same year. Stone did not however live long to enjoy this renewed interest in his work. He died on 23 September 1935, survived until 1951 by his wife Abigail. Yet, although he enjoyed little success in his lifetime, his major novel is now regarded as a classic of Sydney life. While such critics as H.J.Oliver

consider the two parts fail to cohere, Ronald McCuaig argues that they are kept together by the character of Jonah, and C.A.Cranston shows that, beyond the realist framework that Stone himself discounted, the novel has the unity of myth, a take of darkness and light, savagery and love.

Criticism and Biography.

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