The Short Stories of Henry Lawson

Considered one of the greatest short-story writers of Australia - "the friendly and familiar president of the small republic of Australian Literature for a long while yet" - Lawson was instrumental in contributing two themes 'Mateship' and 'The Bush', and making them well-known to future generations of not only Australian but the entire world. While his poetry does not receive much critical accolade, his stories, specialised in dealing with the ambitions, the hard work and the amusements of the people of the bush have been extremely well received. Underneath his stories flows a current of humour, ranging from the uproariously farcical to the satirical, and from the touching to the wry statements on life.

Lawson marks a definite period in Australian history and Australian English literature because he learnt to love his country, and could make his readers aware of it. This may seem sentimental or extravagant, but his patriotism shone forth at a time when other Australian authors, either consciously or unwittingly sought to imitate their English

'Masters', and their works almost always had the flavour of Tennyson or Swinburne or Wells or Kipling. Lawson was not of course the first to recognise the boundless possibilities of the common place joys and experiences of ordinary Australians, but he was the most successful at portraying them.

A.A. Philips has compared the openings of the stories by Hardy, Kipling and O. Henry to those of Lawson.²

"I never pass through Chalk Newton without turning to regard the neighbouring upland, at a point where a lane crosses the long straight highway, dividing this from the next parish..."

[Hardy]

"Once upon a time, very far from England, there lived three men who loved each other so greatly that neither man nor woman could come between them. They were in no sense refined..."

[Kipling]

"Supper was over and there had fallen on the camp a silence that accompanies the rolling of corn-husk cigarettes."

O. HENRY

Compare this to the easy natural slide - in a Lawson story - into the middle of a setting, which, to modern ears at least, is very pleasant.

"We were tramping down in Canterbury, Maoriland, at the time, swagging it - me and Bill - looking for work on the new railway line."

"The 'boss-over-the-board' was leaning with his back to the wall between two shoots, reading a reference handed to him by a green-hand applying for work as a picker-up or wool-roller - a shed rouseabout."

'The Hero of Redclay')

The local atmosphere and colour of the Bush are brought immediately before our senses with a wonderful sense of reality. We consort with 'jackeroos' and 'rouseabouts', we boil the 'billy' and carry 'swag', we have 'mates' who


help, advise and fight over us. H.M. Green calls Lawson the most Australian of all writers. "But even when there are no more shearsers and buck-jumpers and small back-breaking cocky selections and poisonous up-country pubs; when there are no more larrikins and cheap lodging houses, no more swaggies or hot dusty roads and sandy waterless plains - even then the work of Lawson will have a meaning for us, because these things are after all no more than a vehicle through which he expresses something that is not merely of one time and one set of conditions, or of one country either, but belongs to all of us and is as wide as humanity." 

The rich earth of Lawson yielded sometimes nuggets, sometimes mullocks - the admixture of triumphs and tripe that marks the writing for journals. If he meandered into sick sentimentality we must remember the sort of audience he wrote for and the sort of brutal editing that his stories went through.

Lawson's sketches and stories can be classified into different groups - the Joe Wilson series, the Mitchell series etc., but the stories when he wrote them appeared with

long gaps in between; sometimes the Bulletin 'kept' a story and later printed it during a 'slack' season. Lawson had himself pointed this out to A.G. Stephens, and was enraged when the critic 'pinched' it to say "Lawson might conceivably have written many of his fragmentary impressions into a single plotted, climaxed story which would leave a permanent work."^6^7

The Bulletin, which was the market for most Australian short stories laid cut-and-dried rules to which all authors had to conform, so much so that it is quite easy to identify a Bulletin story in an anthology of short stories of the English speaking world.

Brevity had to be the soul of the short story - prolixity ruthlessly pruned, explanatory and descriptive matter cut to the barest minimum. It told one contributor, "The Bulletin is only a little paper and not one to maudlin. We wouldn't allow one and a half columns to William Shakespeare."^7

Other requirements were simplicity, directness, realism and dramatic force. The 'idea' of the story was

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made more important than its development; when this view was taken to extremes, some of the short stories ended up as 'pegs' to 'hang' the idea on. Many critics agree that if the Australian short story as a whole has been accused of being too anecdotal, the Bulletin tradition was largely responsible.

Later of course, Lawson rebelled against its traditions when he wrote the longer and more leisurely stories of the Joe Wilson series, when Blackwood's magazine gave him scope to elaborate his tales.

The Bulletin therefore was important as a very early influence on Lawson. Through following it, he gained objectivity, realism and brevity. But through the same influence he became spasmodic, slight and scrappy. Yet in his best stories, even though he wrote for the Bulletin - one may say in spite of it - he attained great heights because the realism was illuminated by imagination, and objectivity and fidelity to fact was steeped in a deep sympathy.

Lawson has been compared to Bret Harte, to Mark Twain and likened to the Russian author Gorki.
Both Bret Harte and Lawson are concerned with rough and ready pioneers, and a struggle to live in a hostile environment, but the Californian writer thinks of the story before anything else, while to Lawson the human element is more important. Bret Harte has a streak of sentimentality in him which at times becomes positively sickening, and so his characters, for example, the inhabitants of Roaring Camp, are unreal and melodramatic and somehow 'stagy'. Lawson is saved from blatant sentimentality by his realism and his humour, and most of his characters are natural and innocent of any pose.

Lawson's characters are full of strong feelings; they are emotional with a too-easily stimulated sensibility, and as such it is dangerously easy for the writer to degenerate into mawkish sentimentality. And sometimes Lawson does give way to this temptation, and talks of fine fellows ruined by drink, fellows with a past, fellows with a wistful 'I might have been' look.

But very often we see that Lawson has saved himself on the brink, through effective understatement and the use of the irony. And this he does too consistently and too often to be dismissed as merely fortuitous. The following is a typical excerpt from one of his stories:
"I suppose he thought it was dark and that I couldn't see his face. (There's a good many people in this world who think you can't see because they can't.) It made me feel like I used to feel sometimes in the days when I felt things—"

"Come on, Mitchell," said Tom Hall, "you've had enough beer."

"I think I have," said Mitchell. "Besides, I promised to send a wire to Jake Boreham to tell him his mother's dead. Jake's shearing at West-O-Sunday; shearing won't be over for three or four weeks, and Jake wants an excuse to get away without offending old Baldy and come down and have a fly round with us before the holidays are over."

(‘The Blindness of One-Eyed Bogan’)

Both Bret Harte and Mark Twain transformed the 'tall story' into the short story; both writers have used folk humour and exaggeration; both have succeeded, through earthy idiom, in recording the 'American voice' of their characters. Lawson does a similar thing for Australia. Indeed the openings of his stories have a striking resemblance to Twain's.

The opening passage of Huckleberry Finn reads:

"You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another..."  

(Huckleberry Finn)

And the opening of a Lawson story:

"You might work this yarn up. I've often thought of doin' it meself, but I ain't got the words. I knowed a lot of funny an' rum yarns about the Bush, an', I often wished I had the gift of writin'. I could fell a lot better yarns than the rot they put in books sometimes, but I nivver had no education."

('Gettin' Back on Dave Regan')

Again, while both Gorki and Lawson wrote of the lower classes and both were politically active, Lawson is different in that we find no generalisations about man or abstractions on Nature, no vast range of knowledge. Lawson belonged to that class of writers who sense more than see, who propound no eternal human values, but know what it is that makes man humane.


Perhaps the best way to understand Lawson is to compare him with another Australian writer, Steele Rudd, who has immortalised 'family humour' in his "father" stories.

Lawson, like Rudd, has dealt with the humour in the life of a small, closely knit group, the family. But while Rudd's humour is that of caricature - we laugh because we recognise the caricatures, and the originals behind them - Lawson has an intellectual detachment.

"What Steele Rudd presents as a literary form is the humour of family gossip and the gossip of the district which you hear every day at pubs or round the family table or over the backyard fence. The memorable comic episodes become part of the family saga: the day Mum used washing soda instead of baking soda in the scones when the new parson came to tea, or the misfortunes of father when he tried to paper the lumber room."¹¹

Compare this to the tale of a selector whose suffering is compressed in just one paragraph by Lawson:

"Tom was admitted to the lunatic asylum at Parramatta the next year, and the squatter was sent there the following

¹¹ Hope, A.D., 'Steele Rudd and Henry Lawson' in Henry Lawson; Criticism 1894-1971, p.311.
summer, having been ruined by the drought, the rabbits, the banks and a wool-ring. The two became friendly and had many a sociable argument about the feasibility - or otherwise - of blowing open the floodgates of Heaven in a dry season with dynamite."

How would Rudd have treated the same incident? He would have described the rabbits eating the farmer out of hearth and home perhaps, the farmer chasing them with a gun, running into a clothes - line, and peppering the air with bullets before being thrown into the lunatic asylum. And what a field day Rudd would have had in narrating how they proposed to dynamite Heaven! In other words, Rudd would have been 'creative', he would have evolved humour and perhaps in this very creativity lies his limitation.

This is not to belittle Rudd, Rudd's book *On the Selection* is a series of funny episodes that 'happen' to a family, - comic adventures and mishaps - it has a rich vein of comicality that in no way is patronizing, nor does it neglect the hard and gloomy side of life (which however remains in the background); it is not presented from a detached 'outside' point of view. His stories are so popular

that many who may not even have read them know 'Dad' and 'Dave' as intimately as their own family members.

In Lawson however the situation is never made the occasion for humour in itself; it has to be completely integrated with the character and the dialogue. In a nutshell, Rudd's bush characters are almost stereotypes, Lawson's 

__inspire__ stereotypes.

Lawson, like Mark Twain, found his material in the yarns that spread by word of mouth among miners, stump orators bush-men, pub-philosophers and the like. With his own accurately observed details of people and places, the yarn got a dimension of realism, that drew from the depths of national character and the undercurrents of humour that are peculiarly Australian.

While most writers are content to introduce the narrator merely as the conventional instrument to start the story, in Lawson he remains a character almost equal to the protagonist in stature. His wry comments, his whimsical judgements and his intervention with his audience brings out humorous asides, homilies and very often the ironic ending, as here:
"And did you stoush him?"

"No, I was going to, but Tom wouldn't let me. He said he was frightened I might make a mess of it, and he did it himself."

"Did what? Make a mess of it?"

"He made a mess of the other man that standared the publican. I'd be funny if I was you. Where's the matches?"

"And could Tom fight?"

"Yes. Tom could fight."

"Did you travel long with him after that?"

"Ten years."

"And where is he now?"

"Dead. — Give us the matches."

('Shootin' the Moon')^13

Lawson's poetry reflects the quick vigorous movement, a zest, for Life, an involvement with the bush and a defiant spirit of independence that is found in his fiction. Indeed, sometimes the themes and characters are repeated.

One of his early ballads, 'The fire at Ross's Farm' became the prose sketch 'The Bush Fire'; in the latter he

13. Lawson, Henry 'Shootin' the Moon'. While the Billy Boils, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1896, p.96.
reverses the situations of the two lovers, there is more character development and the addition of humour.

Similarly the theme of the poem 'Ruth' is found in 'The Hero of Redday'. 'Ruth', originally conceived as a long poem and then as a long melodrama, was returned to Lawson with the tactful comment that, if staged, it would take three weeks to play! The prose version is far less melodramatic and certainly more effective: firstly because, Lawson tagged an introduction, and secondly because the narrator Mitchell puts in a few satirical comments to counteract sentimentality.

The way in which Lawson incorporates humour in the dialogue is again remarkable. Indeed, Lawson's prose style, dismissed earlier as having too little beauty of form, and too much crudity and roughness of substance, is now receiving belated praise. Most critics now appreciate the fact that his characters speak appropriately, though (as when we read 'crimson' instead of bloody), we get an occasional suspicion that the author, perhaps out of a sense of delicacy, is not quite honest! The dialogue however, fits the character to a T; and 'casual' conversation is one of the most difficult things to achieve in literature. H.M. Green brings out the subtle difference that makes a writer great:
"Lawson can make his characters speak, not as they would actually have spoken but as they might have spoken if they had been able to express themselves exactly as they wanted."14

The following passage is characteristic:

"No," I said, "It's not that, Boss."

"Well, what is it, Joe?"

"I - well, the fact is, I want little Mary."

He puffed at his pipe for a long time, then I thought he spoke.

"What did you say, Boss?" I said.

"Nothing, Joe," he said. "I was going to say a lot, but it wouldn't be any use. My father used to say a lot to me before I was married."

I waited a good while for him to speak.

"Well, Boss," I said, "What about Mary?"

"Oh! I suppose that's all right, Joe," he said.

I - I beg your pardon. I got thinking of the days when I was courtin' Mrs. Black."15

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Typically, Lawson does not end the story with a 'Take her, my boy, with my blessing'. That last sentence reflects the universal theme of marriage, providing added depth to the story.

Lawson's apparently simple style achieves the effect aimed at without the reader becoming aware of its technical artistry. For instance, the economy in words with which Lawson can sum up a character or situation. As in the following:

"And he hadn't 'any ideers' - at least, he said to himself - except as regarded anything that looked to him like what he called 'funny business', under which heading he catalogued tyranny, treachery, interference with the liberty of the subject by the subject, 'blanky lies' or swindles — most especially, and above all, treachery to a mate.

(Andy Page's Rival)\(^16\)

'... My voice went like an ungreased wagon wheel, and I only squeezed her hand.'

('A Double Buggy at Lahay's Creek')\(^17\)

Lawson had a retentive memory; not only would he

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17. Lawson, 'A Double Buggy at Lahay's Creek', The Bush Undertaker and Other Stories, p.194.
remember incidents and use them in his stories, he would also remember in which stories he had incorporated them. And therefore, when he 'repeats' incidents, it shows he was running short of material while simultaneously improving in expression and colloquial style:

For example the 'handkerchief' incident which appears in 'The Drover's Wife' appears later in 'Water Them Geraniums.' A look at both is revealing:

'She is hurt now, and tears spring to her eyes as she sits down again by the table. She takes up a handkerchief to wipe the tears away, but pokes her eyes with the bare fingers instead. The handkerchief is full of holes, and she finds that she has put her thumb through one, and her forefinger through another.

This makes her laugh, to the surprise of the dog. She has a keen, very keen, sense of ridiculous; and some time or the other she will amuse bushmen with the story.' 18

('The Drover's Wife')

"Amuse with the story" is what Lawson does in a later story:

"... he came running into the house and screamed:
'Marther I mother! there's another milker down with the pleorer!' (pleuro - pneumonia)... I jist sat down to have a good cry, and felt for my han'kerchief - it was a rag of a han'kerchief, full of holes... without seeing' what I was doin' I put me finger through one hole an' me thumb through the other, and poked me fingers into me eyes... then I had to laugh."¹⁹

Lawson's greatest quality as a short story writer therefore, is his delicately balanced combination of sympathy and humour. 'The Drover's Wife', a picture of the courage shown by a woman of the bush in facing loneliness, hardships and dangers, touches a depth seldom plumbed by writers: her tragic life has flashes of humour which she fondly remembers, such as the handkerchief episode and the incident of the black 'feller'. The Joe Wilson series too, has a depressing atmosphere, but through the poverty, unemployment, sickness and loneliness we find the saving grace of outback humour.

Similarly the humourous stories do carry a tinge of sadness. Indeed the humour accentuates the tragedy through realistic contrast which makes the reader both sigh and

smile: for example the immortal lines from 'The Bush Undertaker'.

"Hashes ter hashes, due ter dus, an 'gerlorious rassraction

('The Bush Undertaker')²⁰

"... it nearly breaks a man's heart when his old drinking chum turns teetotaller - it's worse than if he got married or died.'

(The Boozer's Home')²¹

Humour, hardship and sorrow are all intermingled in his stories. As Lawson himself said, "There seems a quiet sort of sadness running through outback humour."²²

The positive achievement is always stressed by Lawson, all the more so because of negative circumstance: the protagonist Joe, for example, labours day and night to surprise his wife with a double buggy, but we are also made witness to the quarrels between husband and wife, lack of finance, dissatisfaction and the like. Lawson does not idealize his characters; their foibles are presented, but with an indulgent eye.

The bush-men in his books are men, not the big proprieters or rich squatters, but hard-working shearers, rouseabouts, stockmen, inn-keepers, gold seekers—some heroes, most protagonists, but all of them interesting. They are always found in their natural surroundings, trudging in overbearing heat, boiling a 'billy' by a campfire, working claims, drinking at pubs; and not one is taken to England or even Sydney to tell his story.

"He wore a good-humoured grin at most times, as I noticed later on; he was of a type of Bushman that I always liked—the sort that seem to get more good-natured the longer they grow, yet are hard-knuckled and would accommodate a man who wanted to fight or trash a bully in a good-natured way. The sort that like to carry somebody's baby round, and cut wood, carry water and do little things for overworked married Bushwomen. He wore a saddle tweed sac suit two sizes too small for him, and his face, neck, great hands and bony wrists were covered with sun blotches and freckles."\(^{23}\)

(Send Round the Hat!)

The women fall into two broad categories: the woman who marries and becomes worn-out, (like Mrs.Spicer who is 'past carin', or the woman who dies in childbirth with no help at all near her in 'No Place for a Woman') or the

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woman who remains behind and breaks her heart (as the Giraffe's girl-friend in 'Send Round the Hat).

Even the dogs are drawn as carefully as their masters:

'Alligator', the black and yellow fierce mongrel who kills snakes and guards the drover's wife; 'Five Bob' the intelligent sheep-dog who understands the bush undertaker's utterances as well as any human; Mitchell's dog, an anxious looking true bush-dog (he cannot abide the sights and smells of the city's confusion and cowers from a cab) the foolish black retriever pup of 'The Loaded Dog' fame has for his antagonist a vicious thieving yaller cattle-dog - the list is endless.

Thematically, Lawson's greatest contribution 'mateship', which made men "feeling rootless without long traditions and faceless without national traits, something of a folklore." Not for Lawson the insincere glamorous of the great Australian outback; for him it was a place where men worked like beasts, drifting aimlessly or attempting cultivation or gold digging. But this harsh reality serves as a backdrop, the better to bring out qualities of hospitality, mateship and humour.

Humour then, is one of the main ingredients of Lawson's work, and this, combined with a sharp delineation of character and lively and engaging language, serves to make him one of the most popular writers well-known in his own time; and one of the few writers who is not only great but capable of winning the affection of his readers.