Henry Lawson

Winnowed Verse

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Preface

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WHEN James Cook lifted the veil that had long masked the Terra Incognita of the south, a fresh breeze of adventure blew across the souls of Englishmen. Here for conquest were virgin lands—lands with no history, no legend of achievement or shame—and needing for their conquest no sword, but only strong hearts and an enduring purpose. Men might have seen in their dreams a wider, sweeter England rising as by magic over far oceans, free of fettering old-world traditions, a source of light and leading to all. To claim that such a vision has been realized would be as yet too much; but the foundations have been laid. The wide spaces of the Australian continent are developing a race British in fibre and texture, yet unlike the peoples of Britain in every mere external. It is hard to discern the heights to which this race may attain in the brave days yet to be; but a nation in the making is always an object of supreme interest. Processes that in the days of the Heptarchy moulded Kent and Yorkshire are even now moulding Tasmania and Queensland. It was inevitable that such a race in the making, such a land in the shaping, should find its singer; and that, the singer found, his music should be different from that of all others.

Henry Lawson is the first articulate voice of the real Australia. Other singers in plenty the southern continent knows and has known men and women following bravely in the broad pathway where Byron strode and Wordsworth

loitered; but one alone has found the heart of the new land, its rugged strength, its impatience of old restraints, its hopes and fears and despairs, its irreverence and grim humour, and the tenderness and courage that underlie them all. Lawson is never exquisite as are our greater lyrists. The axemarks show in his work everywhere. But he is sincere and strong and true; and the living beauty in that sincerity and strength and truth grips us more than any delicate craftsmanship. His laughter is as genuine as that of the wind and the sea; he weeps as Australians of the bush weep, with dry eyes and a hard curving mouth. He knows men and women—his men and women. In the world's loneliest places he has grasped hard hands alive with heroic meaning; in crowded cities, where the shames of older nations have overflowed into the new, he has felt the throb of emotions too fine for civilization's sordid setting. In Lawson, too, there is a splendid scorn the scorn of the Things-that-Are and always as he looks into the eyes of his world, seeking the best in the worst, his indignation biases against the shams and the shows that have been brought across the seas to hold Liberty from her purpose. Lawson has lived his people's life, seen with their eyes, felt throb for throb with them in pain and joy; and he sets it all to a rugged music of his own that goes straight to the heart.

When in April, 1915, Australians made the historic landing at Gaba Tepe, the unexpectant world saw young soldiers from a peaceful Commonwealth bearing themselves in the stress of war like veterans of the older fighting nations. The spectacle arrested and surprised. But Lawson had sung of these things more than twenty years before.

Nothing that Australians did in Gallipoli, or later in the fields of France, was new or strange to those who remembered the bugle note of his early poems. With prophetic insight he had dreamed a people's dream had felt in that soldier-heart of his early manhood the tremor of a coming tempest, though the world skies were then clear and had foreknown with every fibre of his being the way in which men of the bush and the mountain and plain would respond to the battle-call.

What of the man who has done and felt these things? He lives his life in Australia still a life very close to ours, yet remote and lonely as that of genius is wont to be. London called to him, and he left us for a while, but came back more Australian than when he went away. You meet him in the street and are arrested by his eyes. Are there such eyes anywhere else under such a forehead? He has the softened speech of the deaf, but the eyes speak always more than the voice; and the grasp of his hand is brotherly. A sense of great sympathy and human kindliness is always about him. You will not talk much with Lawson, but you will not lightly forget your first meeting. A child will understand him better than a busy city man, for the child understands the eternal language of the heart written in the eye; and Australia, strong-thewed pioneer though she be, has enough of the child left in her to understand her son.

Henry Lawson was born in a tent on the Grenfell gold field in 1867. His father was a Norse sailor who became a digger; his mother came of a Kentish family of gipsy blood and tradition. Henry spent his boyhood on old mining fields, and on a selection his father had taken up. Later, he came

to Sydney and learned coach painting, attended a night school, dabbled in spiritualism, and was caught in the wave of socialism. Very early his verses attracted attention. He was the voice of a new movement; the ringing, surging rebellion of his song echoed the unrest of the eighties and nineties, years full of great labour strikes and the breaking up of old political parties. Then he wandered far into the interior of Australia—his fame growing all the while—saw and shared the rude strenuous life of his brothers in a dozen varieties of toil, crossed over to New Zealand, and added to the tang of the gum leaves something of the salt of the great Southern Ocean. He has lived the life that he sings and seen the places of which he writes; there is not a word in all his work which is not instantly recognized by his readers as honest Australian. The drover, the stockman, the shearer, the rider far on the skyline, the girl waiting at the sliprails, the big bush funeral, the coach with flashing lamps passing at night along the ranges, the man to whom home is a bitter memory and his future a long despair, the troops marching to the beat of the drum, the coasting vessel struggling through blinding south-westerly gales, the great grey plain, the wilderness of the Never-Never—in long procession the pictures pass, and every picture is a true one because Henry Lawson has been there to see with the eyes of his heart.

At twenty-one, Lawson was probably the most remarkable writer of verse in Australia. Some critics of those days thought his genius prematurely developed, and likely to flame up strongly and fade away swiftly. Lawson disappointed their predictions. He remained; he continued

to write; he gathered grip and force as the years went by. The dates of original publication attached to each poem in this collection will enable the reader to follow the author's progress. They cover a wide range of years. Before he had reached his twenty-first birthday, Lawson, keenly alive to all the movements about him in Sydney, found one political faction discussing a closer imperialism of a rather mechanical pattern, while another cried for an equally machine-made socialism. He listened to the outpourings of oratory one night, and, remembering the growth of wealth and luxury on the one hand and the increasing squalor of the city slums on the other, went home and wrote FACES IN THE STREET—a notable achievement that brought him immediate local fame. Seven years afterwards, still with the passionate hope of a purifying revolution in his heart, he saw THE STAR OF AUSTRALASIA rise through tumult and battle smoke and foretold, in lines that surge and sweep, the storm that was to break down divisions between rich and poor, and to call to life a great nationhood through a baptism of blood. At forty-eight he sang of MY ARMY, O MY ARMY, the struggling "Vanguard" always suffering in the trenches of civilization that others might go on to victory. Never was the view of the final triumph obscured; but the means by which it might be attained seemed more clouded in doubt as the years went by. Then, when he had completed his full half-century of life, the poet's vision cleared. At fifty he wrote ENGLAND YET, a song of pride in a greater nationality, wider and more embracing than the old Australia of his dreams. Here is natural progression of

thought—a mind growing with the years, a hope enlarging with the great movements of the race.

In simpler and homelier themes the continual widening of his sympathy is equally marked. THE DROVER'S SWEETHEART, with its sob of delight in the last stanza, was written at twenty-two. Ten years afterwards he penned the tenderest and most perfect of all his poems, THE SLIPRAILS AND THE SPUR. Dear old BLACK BONNET—a picture as true as it is sweet in all years and all places—first tripped to church in his verse when he was forty- nine; at fifty, SCOTS OF THE RIVERINA showed that he had not lost his power of dealing with the tragedy that underlies life's commonplace. The reader may trace a similar growth of sympathy for the men and women whom civilization condemns, or who have come to be regarded as "down and out.' He saw SWEENEY with battered humorous face and empty bottle in 1891; PAST CARIN', with its completeness of heartbreak, was written in 1899; and the grim realism of ONE-HUNDRED-AND-THREE, which must stand among Lawson's greatest efforts, appeared in 1908. Always there is growth, apparent from year to year and decade to decade. The verses vary greatly in merit and manner, but the thought and feeling behind them move on into wider places. Lawson fulfilled his first promise and did something more.

Of Lawson's place in literature it is idle to speak. Something of what Burns did for Scotland, something of what Kipling did for India, he has done for Australia; but he is not in the least like either Kipling or Burns. Judged as verse, his work has nearly always a certain crudity; fudged by the higher standard of poetry, it is often greatest when

the crudity is most apparent. In the coming chances and changes it is daring to predict immortality for any writer. The world is being remade in fire and pain; in that remaking every standard of achievement may be altered utterly from those to which we have been accustomed; but if permanency is to be looked for anywhere, it is in vital, red-blooded work such as Lawson’s—work that came so straight from the heart that it must always find a heart to respond to it. All Australia is there, painted with a big brush in the colours in which its people see it.

David McKee Wright

September, 1918

The Sliprails and the Spur

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The coloursof the setting sun
Withdrew across the Western land—
He raised the sliprails, one by one,
And shot them home with trembling hand;
Her brown hands clung—her face grew pale—
Ah! quivering chin and eyes that brim!—
One quick, fierce kiss across the rail,
And, “Good-bye, Mary!’ “Good-bye, Jim!’

Oh, he rides hard to race the pain
Who rides from love, who rides from home;
But he rides slowly home again,
Whose heart has learnt to love and roam.

A hand upon the horse’s mane,
And one foot in the stirrup set,
And, stooping back to kiss again,
With “Good-bye, Mary! don’t you fret!
When I come back”—he laughed for her—
“We do not know how soon ’twill be;
I’ll whistle as I round the spur—
You let the sliprails down for me.”

She gasped for sudden loss of hope,
As, with a backward wave to her,
He cantered down the grassy slope
And swiftly round the darkening spur.
Black-pencilled panels standing high,
And darkness fading into stars,

And blurring fast against the sky,
A faint white form beside the bars.
    And often at the set of sun,
In winter bleak and summer brown,
She’d steal across the little run,
And shyly let the sliprails down.
And listen there when darkness shut
The nearer spur in silence deep,
And when they called her from the hut
Steal home and cry herself to sleep.
    And he rides hard to dull the pain
Who rides from one that loves him best. . .
And he rides slowly back again,
Whose restless heart must rove for rest.

The Star of Australasia

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Weboast no more of our bloodless flag, that rose from a nation’s slime;
Better a shred of a deep-dyed rag from the storms of the olden time.
From grander clouds in our peaceful skies than ever were there before
I tell you the Star of the South shall rise—in the lurid clouds of war.
It ever must be while blood is warm and the sons of men increase;
For ever the nations rose in storm, to rot in a deadly peace.
There’ll come a point that we will not yield, no matter if right or wrong;
And man will fight on the battle-field while passion and pride are strong—
So long as he will not kiss the rod, and his stubborn spirit sours—
And the scorn of Nature and curse of God are heavy on peace like ours.

* * * * * * *

There are boys out there by the western creeks, who hurry away from school
To climb the sides of the breezy peaks or dive in the shaded pool,
Who’ll stick to their guns when the mountains quake to the tread of a mighty war,
And fight for Right or a Grand Mistake as men never fought

before;
When the peaks are scarred and the sea-walls crack till the furthest hills vibrate,
And the world for a while goes rolling back in a storm of love and hate.

* * * * * * *

There are boys to-day in the city slum and the home of wealth and pride
Who'll have one home when the storm is come, and fight for it side by side,
Who'll hold the cliffs against armoured hells that batter a coastal town,
Or grimly die in a hail of shells when the walls come crashing down.
And many a pink-white baby girl, the queen of her home to-day,
Shall see the wings of the tempest whirl the mist of our dawn away—
Shall live to shudder and stop her ears to the thud of the distant gun,
And know the sorrow that has no tears when a battle is lost and won—
As a mother or wife in the years to come, will kneel, wild-eyed and white,
And pray to God in her darkened home for the "men in the fort to-night."

* * * * * * *

But, oh! if the cavalry charge again as they did when the world was wide,
'Twill be grand in the ranks of a thousand men in that

glorious race to ride,
And strike for all that is true and strong, for all that is grand and brave,
And all that ever shall be, so long as man has a soul to save.
He must lift the saddle, and close his “wings”, and shut his angels out,
And steel his heart for the end of things, who’d ride with a stockman scout,
When the race they ride on the battle track, and the waning distance hums,
And the shelled sky shrieks or the rifles crack like stockwhip amongst the gums—
And the straight is reached and the field is gapped and the hoof-torn sward grows red
With the blood of those who are handicapped with iron and steel and lead;
And the gaps are filled, though unseen by eyes, with the spirit and with the shades
Of the world-wide rebel dead who’ll rise and rush with the Bush Brigades.

* * * * * * *

All creeds and trades will have soldiers there—give every class its due—
And there’ll be many a clerk to spare for the pride of the jackeroo.
They’ll fight for honour and fight for love, and a few will fight for gold,
For the devil below and for God above, as our fathers fought of old;
And some half-blind with exultant tears, and some stiff-