Henry Lawson

The Skyline Riders and Other Verses

Henry Lawson

The Skyline Riders and Other Verses

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338082022

Table of Contents

"

Introduction

Table of Contents

An Unconventional Sketch

By J.G.L.

He “gets there” every time with words that ring true, because they are freighted with stern, hard facts.

Listen to him when he tells you “How the Land was Won,” and in the telling drops in a bit of autobiography—

“They toiled and they fought through the shame of it—
Through wilderness, flood, and drought;
They worked, in the struggles of early days,
Their sons’ salvation out.
The white girl-wife in the hut alone,
The men on the boundless run,
The miseries suffered, unvoiced, unknown—
And that’s how the land was won.”

—*Verses Popular and Humorous*.

No man knows this sort of life intuitively. He must live it. No one need ever doubt that Henry Lawson went right through the mill. For better or for worse he took the gruelling like a man.

Leaving the farm, Henry Lawson learnt carriage painting. What sort of a hand he was with the brush I cannot say. It is not often that the poetic temperament can be persuaded to successfully master the uninteresting trade accomplishments.

How and when he began to write, and with what measure of success his work was received by the editors to whom the

first lines were sent is another matter on which I have no statement to make. Lawson will tell you all this himself one of these days. He has it written and ready. When the right day comes the manuscript will be carefully edited and be given to the world in book form.

During 1887 Lawson began his connection with the "*Bulletin*." It was then that he found the audience he desired. Editor and readers alike were not slow to recognise the strength and ability of the new comer. Here was a man of merit to whom they might reasonably look for something above the average. And Australia did not look to Henry Lawson in vain, for during the winter of 1888 he gave us his true and powerful "Faces in the Street," which will live for a long time among the very best things done by an Australian hand. If you have not read this poem do so at the earliest opportunity. It is a fine piece of work, full of literary ability and heart. Lawson, at twenty years of age, could see and feel. If there is any heart in you this great poem will find it.

"They lie, the men who tell us in a loud decisive tone
That want is here a stranger, and that misery's unknown;
For where the nearest suburb and the city proper meet
My window-sill is level with the faces in the street—
Drifting past, drifting past,
To the beat of weary feet—
While I sorrow for the owners of those faces in the street.

And cause I have to sorrow, in a land so young and fair,
To see upon those faces stamped the marks of want and care;
I look in vain for traces of the fresh and fair and sweet,
In sallow sunken faces that are drifting through the street—

Drifting on, drifting on,
To the scrape of restless feet;
I can sorrow for the owners of the faces in the street.

In hours before the dawning dims the starlight in the sky,
The wan and weary faces first begin to trickle by,
Increasing as the moments hurry on with moving feet,
Till, like a pallid river, flow the faces in the street—
Flowing in, flowing in,
To the beat of hurried feet—
Ah! I sorrow for the owners of those faces in the street.

—*In the Days when the World was Wide*.

These verses will give you some idea of the work which finds a place of honour in “In the Days when the World was wide,” the earliest of the volumes which carry Henry Lawson’s name. This book was published in 1896, by which time he had a big following, and was rapidly rising into favour. The title poem of the volume mentioned above, which is replete with forceful stanzas that are known throughout Australia, had placed Henry Lawson among the first of our poets. Here are a few verses of thisgreat poem—

“’Twas honest metal and honest wood—in the days of the Outward bound—
When men were gallant and ships were good—roaming the wide world round.
The gods could envy a leader then, when ‘Follow me, lads!’ he cried—
They faced each other and fought like men in the days when the world was wide.

They tried to live as a freeman should—they were happier men than we,

In the glorious days of wine and blood, when Liberty crossed the sea;
’Twas a comrade true or a foeman then, and a trusty sword well tried—
They faced each other and fought like men in the days when the world was wide.”

—*In the Days when the World was Wide*.

“Faces in the Street” Henry Lawson claims to be his masterpiece. Only very recently did he tell me that he was under twenty years of age when he wrote this, his best, poem. I distinctly remember him mentioning the name.

It was in 1896 that I first met Lawson. At this time he andMr. Le Gay Breretonwere engaged putting the finishing touches on “In the Days when the World was Wide,” which Messrs. Angus and Robertson then had in the press. They were working in a back store with galley and page proofs all over a long table, and seemed not to take matters very seriously. It was in that same old store room that Lawson wrote “To an Old Mate,” the introductory poem to his first volume.

You will find in these pages a trace of
That side of our past which was bright,
And recognise sometimes the face of
A friend who has dropped out of sight—
I send them along in the place of
The letters I promised to write.

—*In the Days when the World was Wide*.

This is Lawson all over.

He is so human. Indeed, he has too much heart. What Lawson suffers through that poetic temperament of his no

one but himself can ever fully know. He sees and feels more keenly than you or I can ever hope to do, and through his eyes and his heart he has added materially to the literature of his native land.

There are many people who say they cannot see anything in Henry Lawson's work. There are always people who find it so much easier to criticise than to praise. Anyone can criticise; very few know just how to express their approval of what they see or read.

Then there is a strong opposition among a certain class to anything Australian. "We live in Australia; give us something that does not smell of the bush," is frequently heard. And this, too, from people who should know better. It is a good thing that Henry Lawson began his life in the bush. Had he spent his early days in the heart of any of our capitals, he might never have written a line worth reading. His work is a standing rebuke to those who see no good in their own country. Not even his worst enemy could ever say that Henry Lawson has gone back on Australia. He has placed the nation under an obligation which can never be fully paid. He is a man in a million, sent to speak to us of things that our own half-blind eyes fail to see. And how he has spoken! Ever since 1887, when he first got a footing in the "*Bulletin*," he has written hard. Now and then he shoots wide of the target, but he generally "gets home" with a clinking "bully." He many a time phrases a thing in rather an ugly way. That cannot be helped. Eyes are not all focussed alike. Nor are all hearts tuned to the same key. Henry Lawson is fearless and outspoken to a degree which many dislike. Yet it is a good thing that there are men of his stamp

in the world. If there were not, many a wrong would go unrighted. In “The Writer’s Dream” (*Verses Popular and Humorous*) he says:—

‘I was born to write of the things that are! and the strength was given to me;
‘I was born to strike at the things that mar the world as the world should be!
‘By the dumb heart-hunger and dreams of youth, by the hungry tracks I’ve trod—
‘I’ll fight as a man for the sake of truth, nor pose as a martyred god.
‘By the heart of “Bill” and the heart of “Jim,” and the men that their hearts deem “white,”
‘By the handgrips fierce, and the hard eyes dim with forbidden tears!
—I’ll write!

And the men of the back country do stand by him. They are his audience and his friends at the same time. Henry Lawson, the man who “humped bluey” with them, is always sure of a warm reception. He is the bushman’s poet every time. The “back blocker” appreciates his work better than I do.

I can tell you a queer incident that will go to show the feeling which exists in the minds of some of the men who follow his work very closely. Lawson was taking a “refresher” or two on North Sydney one night, and got his tongue loosened. More than likely he started, as he often does when he gets a little “jolly,” to roll off “The Ballad of the Rouseabout,” or something of the kind, which one of his audience recognised.

“Where did you learn that?” the listener asked.

“I wrote it,” was the reply.

“A nice chance you’ve got of writing anything like that. That’s Lawson’s.”

“I’m Lawson — Henry Lawson.”

“You lie! Lawson’s a ——” and with this the men came to blows, the poet defending his own name, and his admirer hitting out in defence of the writer he admired.

Being a poet, then, is not all joy, especially when one has to do battle for his own name.

Reverting to the ballad quoted above, I find a passage which holds a lot of truth. Poets, Australian poets in particular, have a way of making their creations tell rather much of their own history. Henry Lawson is no exception to the rule. Of course, it may just happen that there is not the slightest connection between the writer and his rouseabout.

“A rouseabout of rouseabouts, above—beneath regard,
I know how soft is this old world, and I have learnt how hard —
A rouseabout of rouseabouts—I know what men can feel,
I’ve seen the tears from hard eyes slip as drops from polished steel.

“We hold him true who’s true to one however false he be
(There’s something wrong with every ship that lies beside the quay);
We lend and borrow, laugh and joke, and when the past is drowned,
We sit upon our swags and smoke and watch the world go round.”

—*Verses Popular and Humorous*.

You would like to know how Henry Lawson works? Very fast. He is one of the quickest writers in Australia, and one of the surest. There is no fiddling with every second or third line. Once he sits down to write, his thoughts fly too fast for his pen. There is no striving for rhymes. He finishes verse after verse in one writing. Once he makes a beginning, he invariably goes through to the end.

On one occasion I asked Lawson to write me an ode to an old gum tree. He said he would. Several days after he came to me saying, “I can do that poem for you now, and I’ll call it ‘The Stringy-Bark Tree.’ ” “Right, Henry,” I replied, “start now.” Getting pencil and paper he made himself an impromptu desk in the yard at Angus & Robertson’s, and wrote the following verses, which were first published in “*The Amateur Gardener*”:—

“There’s a whitebox and pine on the ridges afar,
Where the ironbark, bluegum, and peppermint are;
There is many another, but dearest to me,
And the king of them all was the stringy-bark tree.

“Then of stringy-bark slabs were the walls of the hut,
And from stringy-bark saplings the rafters were cut;
And the roof that long sheltered my brothers and me
Was of broad sheets of bark from the stringy-bark tree.

“Now still from the ridges, by ways that are dark,
Come the shingles and palings they call stringy-bark;
Though you ride through long gullies a twelve months you’ll see
But the old whitened stumps of the stringy-bark tree.”

—*When I was King, and Other Verses*.