HENRY LAWSON AND HIS CRITICS

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By

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HENRY LAWSON AND HIS CRITICS

W. S. GILBERT, in one of his operatic absurdities, makes a character sing something to the effect that every boy and every girl that’s born into this world alive is either a little Liberal or else a little Conservative. He forgot, however, the tertium quid, the some-what that is no-what, the Critic! Sydney Smith once thoughtfully remarked that there were three sexes—Men, Women, and Parsons. Critics come into none of these categories—they are things apart, necrophagous parasites, who manage somehow to make a living out of the dead.

Of course, there are Critics and Critics. There are constructive and appreciative critics, who possess the attributes of taste, judgment, knowledge, justice, benevolence, kindliness, and (most rare and singular of all frail human nature’s traits) modesty. It is a matter for consideration whether a Sydney press critic (so-called) can be thus classified, for he asked the question “What is Litera-
ture?” and answered in his own person “What I like!”

Critics are of two kinds—to wit: literary critics and commercial critics, the latter being professional people whose sterility in things intellectual compels them to parasitical practices. To these critics a lack of original writers would literally spell an empty larder. Of both classes of critics, there are, of course, many subdivisions. There is the fellow who tears his victim to pieces, as though he were a Caliban monster, an outrage on the evolution of humanity; and who then puts the pieces together, with a “Yet-after-all” sigh of concession, re-creates the flayed wretch in the guise of an improved edition of Prospero, and confers upon him a certificate of aesthetical and intellectual solvency. The rehabilitated one might, indeed, well enough exclaim, in the words of the comic playwright: “Perhaps it was right to dissemble your love, but why did you kick me down stairs?”

Bernard Shaw, that great old posing Playboy of the Western World, doesn’t mind this sort of thing! Indeed, he rather likes it! “Say anything about me you care to say; but, for the love of Sweet Publicity, do say something” is his constant plaint. Victor Daley was one of our own poets who cared little about the potency or impotency
of critical venom; but his attitude was one of bored indifference. A sick and wearied man, he was, in the words of one of his friend Lawson’s poems, “Past Carin’”—of which, by the way, an admirable sketch by the late George Lambert gives a creative interpretation as delicate in its sympathy as it is beautiful in its art.

This brings me to the subject of my address, Henry Lawson, who, had he possessed but a drachma of Shaw’s Mount-Everestian assurance, would surely have wallowed in the critical patronage poured around and about him in streams of varied viscosity, which alternated from treacle to pitch. But Lawson was a sensitive man, highly organized, very self-conscious, rendered more so by the physical infirmity of deafness.

Lawson was a supreme technician; in the conte he ranks with the world’s greatest. By the cultured critics of Europe his work is acclaimed with the emotional salute that acknowledges the high rank of a Maupassant or a Gorki—names inscribed with divine honours in the Temple of Everlasting Fame. But Lawson’s technique was misunderstood, underrated, cheaply held; hence he was subjected to criticism of the crudest, the unkindliest. His local critics pulled to pieces his belongings and his beginnings. Had
he been a culprit confined in a gaol he would have 
 enjoyed more of the liberty of the mind than his 
critical investigators accorded him, for mental 
tortures are harder to bear than any form of 
physical pain. This man’s native genius was 
exhaustless, inasmuch as it victoried over his 
physical disability of deafness, and over a tem­
peramental diffidence—and this was the greater 
triumph, for the inmost ear of his mind caught 
keenly the voices of disdain and detraction and the 
taunts of self-satisfied superiority, not, by the way, 
too self-satisfied to be devoid of querulous envy 
of the well-won fruits of high achievement.

The clever ones sought to account for the 
phenomenon called Henry Lawson by citing race, 
lineage, upbringing, what-not. They said that 
he owed his genius to his mother, his melancholy 
outlook on life to his father, etc., etc.—all of which 
does not account for Henry Lawson; for, though 
he had brothers and sisters, he was a spiritual 
solitary, a visitant, a Man from Mars!

To be scientifically valid, facts relating to 
race and family must include everybody com­
posing the group. One cannot found a universal 
law on exceptions. Moreover, the mother is 
a continuous factor in the lives of most men; 
but the mother concept must embrace all her off-
spring. The modern method of pseudo-science is to account for everything. Well! you can give everything a name, but that does not define it, does not explain it. Those who are born blind cannot dogmatize about light!

One of Lawson’s more vicious and vituperative critics—who never permitted his “Australianism” to come between the wind and his own sense of his personal infallibility—permitted to Lawson not so much as a diaphanous adumbration of a pallid personality.

After the poet’s death, when his mind’s ear could no longer be wounded with vulgar detraction and gross abuse, this alleged critic wrote: “Lawson was the masculine image of his mother. He had a woman’s eye for detail, and his Bush and City pictures are a series of wonderful photographs. They seemed astonishingly graphic at their date, but already most of them have passed out of date; most have no deep root in literature, no universal value. Their very realism undoes them; they represent analysis without synthesis; their quality of verisimilidude has a fatal defect of imagination.”

This gentle critic becomes as truculent as Captain Bobadil in Ben Jonson’s play, and “snarl-ingly” remarks that: “Lawson’s snarling reflec-
tions of station life seem often ludicrous to-day, when Labour is king of the woolsheds. His whining reactions to his own misery are contemptible.” The miserable envy of this writer finds vent in the remark that: “£1000 gained by a Departmental levy on New South Wales school-children's pence, with another £2000 got slowly from miscellaneous givers, are to erect a statue of H. Lawson in Sydney. The curious thing is that it will be a monument of English character, English personality. Born in Australia, living in Australia, Lawson re-acted to Australia like the proverbial new-chum, the English towny. He felt easy only when he had a street to walk in and a public house to cling to.”

Commenting on the foregoing vulture-scream of vituperation, a kindlier and juster critic, Walter Jago, declared: “Lawson wrote for forty years and always used the prefix ‘Henry’ to his surname, but the abbreviation is pardonable in view of the inaccuracies concerning the levy. A levy was not struck by the Education Department on the school children’s pence, but the children gave as their means permitted or the inclination suggested. . . . Let us hope that the obvious inconsistencies that mark the article will discredit the whole. . . . Still, let us say that Lawson was not photographic;
he had a deep, spiritual insight into things, and
brought to the surface lights and shades of truth
and reality that no camera has ever yet discovered.
... Discerning critics have placed Lawson with
the greatest of the short story writers of the world,
but Lawson never expected to be understood by
the Ghosts of Self and Pelf. When will the little
chaps who read words and not meanings stop yap­
ing about this master of theirs? And when will
they realize that the intellectual eruptions of
the soul are not superficial whimperings? Lawson
is the one writer who has taken us below the sur­
face of things in Australia, and the monument that
we purpose to build to his memory will not remind
us of his external weaknesses, but of his spiritual
greatness.”

Lawson felt very keenly the lack of a systema­
tized education, and he was extremely sensitive on
the subject of his cultural shortcomings. But, as
the poet Gray has said, “To each his sufferings;
all are men;” and it is a fact unquestionable that
his very struggles against the austerities of his
lot intensified Lawson’s spiritual and emotional
energy. In this connexion, Professor Brereton, in
an article written after the poet’s death, and pub­
lished in Hermes, the literary magazine of the
Sydney University, wrote: “If he had spent a few
years up here [id est, at the Sydney University] his work might have been better or worse; it would not have been what it is. Let us be thankful for what we have!” And so say all of us.

Nevertheless, Lawson himself felt always unhappy, for his temperament was anxious and nervous, and some of his verses refer to his sensitiveness on this account. Professor Brereton quotes from one of Lawson’s books the piece entitled “The Uncultured Rhymer to his Cultured Critics”:

You were quick to pick on a faulty line
That I strove to put my soul in;
Your eyes were keen for a dash of mine
In the place of a semi-colon—
And blind to the rest. And is it for such
As you I must brook restriction?
“Was taught too little?” I learnt too much
To use for a pedant’s diction.
I leave you alone in your cultured halls
To drivel and croak and cavil:
Till your voice goes further than college walls,
Keep out of the tracks we travel.

We find the same sense of irritation in “My Literary Friend” and “Australian Bards and Bush Reviewers;” but, after all, Lawson was not nearly so sensitive as some of those who adversely criticize him, and whose opinion no one is permitted to impugn. The poet was, moreover, oftener right than wrong. I remember meeting him one morn-
ing in a very excited and injured mood in the neighbourhood of the Bulletin office. He had left a verse or two dealing with a Russian motif, in which he termed the Emperor the "little father" —in the printed version he was dubbed the "great white Czar"—an epithet bad enough to turn any poet's liver to gall.

Norman Lilley, in the Argus, in an obituary notice, wrote: "Early one morning he [Lawson] came to my Sydney flat in a greatly excited state with an advance copy of one of his books, The Rising of the Court. In a prefatory note he had written of the sketches:—'All are published exactly as I wrote them, without editorial toning down, condensing, or mutilating. I thank the present Editors from my heart.' Taking up a pen, he indignantly struck out the last entirely, and announced that he was going to insist on the edition being withdrawn. After a time he changed his mind, but he pointed out half a dozen cases in which alterations had been made, and asked me to keep the book, with the changes marked, as a record."

The "Literary Friend" was a real obsession to Lawson. The "Literary Friend" never left him. His fame as an Australian poet and story-teller was so great that nearly every sutler who followed
his "Army" wanted to pilfer an unconsidered trifle of it. You see, Lawson's reputation was regarded by a number who knew him as something in the nature of a joint-stock investment that ought to be realized upon when the estate was wound up. So they came toddling out of all sorts of literary dark corners, these unfortunates, and the reminiscences flew about, thick as leaves in the vale of Vallombrosa. One had taught him to spell; one had taught him to read; one had taught him to think; one had taught him to rhyme; though another said that his mother had done that, and had, moreover, trained him to be a poet, and, ye Gods! a successor to Henry Kendall. It was a curious contest among the multitude as to which should carry away most of the spoil and the arms of this stricken hero, lying dead on his poetic plain of Ilion, like a second Hector, whilst, in the background, a remorseless Achilles critic lay in waiting, until the despoilers had dispersed, to reflesh his sword on an enemy disarmed by death.

Touching, by the way, this alleged tuition of our poet in the rhymer's craft—on the face of it, candour compels us to admit that it sounds somewhat apocryphal. Rhyming comes naturally to most intelligent and quick-witted youngsters, and we have the authority of Lawson's brother that
the gift was one inborn with Henry; and that, moreover, at a very early age, our poet was juggling with jingles without the aid of Walker’s *Rhyming Dictionary*; though, doubtless, the doubt anent Henry’s juvenile stupidity comes ready-made to the hand of the friendly detractor—any stick is good enough for the belabouring of a dead poet. Besides, we cannot help remembering Pope’s couplet:

As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
I lisp’d in numbers, for the numbers came—

or Tennyson’s less convincing declaration:

I do but sing because I must
And pipe but as the linnets sing.

Alas! this detraction business is all very pitiful! It is considered a disgraceful thing for a son to defame his own father, notwithstanding Bernard Shaw’s example; but it is a thousand times worse for a country to disown her own sons, and to belittle (in the eyes of nations that envy her the possession of her gifted children) the very genius that contributes to that country’s fame.

Australia’s literary criticism of her own poets reminds one somewhat of Hazlitt’s description of “The Fight” in old-time England, in which, without prejudice, the more or less gentlemanly crowd took part with their walking-sticks and hunting-
crops; and, with commendable impartiality, belaboured the heads and shoulders of the official combatants (in the case of the Australian critics, the Poet and his Editor), and often a hefty blow, aimed at the bard, hits with an unintended clout the self-love of his "improver."

Lawson has had a rough spin at the hands of his friends, no less than at the hands of his foes. His Australian birthright has been challenged; his melancholy has been debited to the land of Ibsen, and his wanderlust to his gipsy blood. He has been accused of being a transplanted Englishman, a Cockney, what-not, and the scroll of heredity has been unrolled in his disfavour. Well, he would be a bold man who could aver how much of the blood of Brian Boru flowed in the veins of Shakespeare, for England's chiefest poet has been claimed a Celt as well as a Teuton. Heredity may very well be left to take care of itself. Genius is so rare, that though it has been thought to be the flower of a lineage, it may, with greater imaginative truth, be considered the aloe-bloom and culminating fruitage of a thousand thousand races germinating along the time-rivers of countless aeons.

It is only just to note in passing that not all Australian critics of Lawson are (or were) pigs
pursuing a poet in clover. When he died, some fine tributes of choice words were laid upon his tomb, as finely phrased wreaths, by reverent hands. The writer of the Age obituary notice declared: "Lawson had all the contempt of a Burns or a Dickens for cant and insincerity. He wanted 'to lash each vile imposture from the land.' When a statue of Burns was unveiled in Sydney he saw in the fashionable throng the things of which the glorious exciseman was intolerant and that denied him the full honours of his genius."

Writing under the pen-name of "Gilrooney," R. J. Cassidy, in the Australian Worker, wrote: "Henry Lawson is dead, but his name and his fame will live on, and grow greater as the years pass by; for he was a Poet of the People, a teller of their tales, and an inspired interpreter of their desires and dreams."

Another, writing in that hour of darkness and national bereavement, said: "Henry Lawson was not a great literary craftsman; but, nevertheless, he is a great national poet. He saw Australia as Australians see it. He wrote about the scenes that he lived and laboured amongst. He pictured the bush, the swagman, and the 'bush pub.' ("The Shanty on the Rise") as no other Australian did. He lived the life as a bushman, and experienced
the hardships of bush road travel, far from the ‘fringe of law.’ Only one who had carried his swag, and danced his way along a bush-track to the tune of ‘Waltzing Matilda’ amid drought, dust, and flies, could write the graphic picture of a swagman’s life, as portrayed in the verse ‘Outback,’ the best verse on the Australian swagman yet written.”

Charles Wilson, Librarian of Parliament Library, Wellington, New Zealand, and one-time editor of the now defunct New Zealand Mail, in his volume of literary appreciations, Rambles in Bookland, wrote: “As the present writer knew him during his short stay in Wellington, Lawson was one of the most retiring, most lovable of men. His deafness made him shrink into his shell, as it were, and to some he may have appeared moody, and, perhaps, in his outlook on the world, a little morbid. But beneath the reticent manner, the dry, ironic humour, the seeming asperity of some of his criticisms on life as he had found it, there was an underlying vein of splendid charity and tolerance. No man better loved his fellow man than Henry Lawson.”

Whilst the poet was still alive, his outspoken opinions made him many adversaries who were not really his enemies, and the attacks begun in
his lifetime were continued after his death. One of these, a writer in a magazine called *Australia*, Fred Davidson, wrote about “The Henry Lawson Myth,” but his criticism was not worth a tinker’s malison. Davidson was angry because what the Yankees call a “Realty” firm (such a one, for instance, as that presided over by Sinclair Lewis’s “Babbitt”) could find no use for any one of the Lawsonian poems to boost a subdivision of this tragic continent. Lawson, in the latter years, when ageing and weary, was employed by the government to boost the Yanco Irrigation Scheme, much to his misery, discontent, and disgust; his only alleviation from utter despair being the friendship of his mate for many years, that racy poet of the bush, Jim Grahame.

In the same magazine as that in which Davidson wrote, *Australia*, Sir Joseph Carruthers declared that Lawson’s “outlook was all wrong;” yet, nevertheless, he is forced to admit that the man whose criticism he criticized had “a real genius as a writer of prose and poetry.”

We live too close to Lawson to be able to gauge his stature. Emerson has told us that one requires to get afar from a mountain if he would know it as such; those who stand under its shadow have no conception of its height. A year ago, the Chief
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Librarian of New South Wales, W. H. Ifould, delivered before the Sydney Henry Lawson Literary Society a lecture entitled “Has Henry Lawson’s Verse any Permanent Value?” The subject of the lecture had been dead only seven years, and one felt with keenest irritation that the lecturer was much too previous by a century or so. He stood directly under the shadow of the Atlas of his theme. Hence Mr Ifould’s lecture is very difficult to deal with by one who lacks the possession of the H. G. Wells model of a Time Machine.

The lecturer is a master of dogmatic assertion, and he questions the permanent value of Lawson on an indictment of negations; but, unlike many other attacks by alleged Australians upon Lawson’s fame, Mr Ifould is neither rude nor vulgar, albeit his arraignment of our poet is irrelevant and captious. He deals with fancies rather than with facts, and assumes the toga praetexta of a literary legislator to promulgate laws of aesthetical taste for a future Australian people composed exclusively of the tribe of the Ifouldi. What Lawson is not, rather than what Lawson is, comprises the sole and assailing obsession of his lecture. No national poet was ever before named “Nihil.”

Mr Ifould would admirably discharge the functions of Official Examiner of Gift-horses to the
Governor of New Barataria. With most meticulous investigation he would discover a moulting feather on the divine wing of Pegasus himself. He stands like Owen Glendower over the vasty deep of Time, calling for a great Australian poet, a writer of great Australian prose; but greatness, literary or other, comes like happiness, when it is least thought of, softly as a dusky foot shod in a moccasin of silence—and when it dwells with us awhile it is unrecognized, or the true nature of our guest becomes plain and appealing only long after its departure for ever. Nations have plodded wearily for centuries in the dusty trail of Time, waiting for the Great Voice, and the great voices have been but few in the mighty harmony of the multitudinous years.

The oldest land, but youngest nation, Australia, the babe continent of the earth, will achieve her great poet, her writer of great prose, in the time of her fulfilment; but such rare gifts are not to be extorted. What if, as Mr Ifould avers, "Marcus Clarke knew nothing of the greater Australia outside the streets and clubs of Melbourne," is that a reason for denying the claims of the creative imagination, or for being ungrateful for such a novel as *For the Term of His Natural Life*? If, as Mr Ifould avers, "Henry Kingsley wrote the
best works of fiction on the squatting period,” need
we grieve inordinately that “he never became truly an Australian . . . any more than Adam Lindsay Gordon was an Australian.” Let us laud the high gods for their largess; let us not peer into the golden mouths and dubiously tap the ivory molars of these gift sons of the Medusa-born.

Of Henry Kendall (as true an Australian as God or Nature could make), Mr Ifould says that he was “without doubt the greatest writer of the poetry of Nature which Australia has produced, might almost have been an English poet trans­planted in Australia. There was nothing essentially Australian in his verses except their subject.” In short, Mr Ifould’s criticism is negative: rarely, indeed, does he affirm. He is, however, quite right when he admits that “Henry Lawson is the most Australian of our writers of verse;” but even whilst making this admission, he qualifies it: “Please do not misunderstand me. I do not con­side that even in Lawson there is literature which might be regarded as essentially Australian in style.” What is an Australian style? This is a dark and dubious mystery, for the unravelment of which I should like to engage the detective genius of a Sherlock Holmes or an Edgar Wallace.
It is a tiresome and ungrateful task, this
review and dismissal of a sceptic’s rosary—a string of assertions most of which are purely negative. We cheerfully admit all the contentions of Mr Ifould, to wit, that Lawson was not Tennyson; that he knew nothing, or little, about the artificial manufacture of new forms of verse, or of the quaint and curious art of onomatopoeia, so deftly cultivated by the tribal bards of many savage races. Like hundreds of other poets, Lawson took a verse-form already made for his handling. He had so much to say, that he could not spare the time to experiment in new metres, even if he had had the taste or the ability to do so. He was simple, sensuous, and passionate. Moreover, he was sincere, honest in speech and meaning, and sympathetic to the innermost heart-core. With Clarence Mangan, he felt the deep sorrow of all souls in trouble—“Here, and in Hell;” with Burns, he could hope for the ultimate redemption even of Auld Nickie-ben himself.

Professor Saillens, writing of Lawson in the Paris Mercure, some twenty years ago, paid high tribute to the poems of Lawson, declaring that they were “deeply and eternally human.” He said: “Australia has a great future before her, and particularly a great artistic future, but she will never have another Lawson!” In uttering this
eulogy, the brilliant Frenchman and fine critic proclaimed an emphatic truth.

From the niggling captiousness, the carping bitterness, and grudging praise of his own alleged countrymen, one loves to turn to the wider, deeper appreciation of the authentic critics who, in other lands, hailed the bright promise of Lawson’s work.

Reviewing one of our poet’s prose volumes, now many years ago, the English Spectator said: “It is strange that one we would venture to call the greatest Australian writer should be practically unknown to England.” St John Adcock thereon commented: “If we are no longer subject to this reproach, I believe that most of us still know him only as a poet,” and this English critic has much to say of Lawson as a poet which is worth the hearing, as: “Whether Kendall was a greater poet than Adam Lindsay Gordon may be a matter of opinion, and it may be a matter of opinion whether certain of his contemporaries are not greater poets than Henry Lawson, but there is no question that as Gordon stood pre-eminent in the past, so Lawson stands to-day, the most typical, the most representative Australian poet of his time, not only because he gets into his verse so much of the life and character, the scenery and colloquial language of the Australian bush, the town, the sheep-station, and
the mining-camp; but that the whole body of his poetry is alive with the freshness, the freedom and restless vigour, the spontaneous sentiment and humour, raw humanity and unstudied (sometimes almost crude) simplicity of a race that is still in the making and has not had its natural impulses put into harness, nor the strong angles of its individuality smoothed down by custom and the common laws of convention. His verse is not merely or even primarily a matter of technique; he has never tried to model himself on the standard English poets; whatever he is not, he is always himself, finding his themes in his own country, and expressing them with an art that seems as natural to him as if he were but a pipe through which the spirit of Australia blew to music.”

Touching on Lawson’s story-work, St John Adcock continues: “As an artist in the short story he has been classed with Kipling, with De Maupassant, with Bret Harte; but he is closer akin to the last than to either of the others. The kinship to Bret Harte is suggested in some of his verse—or, perhaps, only seems to be, because both writers pictured similar types of Humanity as they existed under similar conditions in their different nations—and though there are no abler, or more racily intimate stories of the comedy and tragedy of the
outer circles of Australian life than there are in his two books, *On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails* and *While the Billy Boils*, it was as a poet that Lawson first became known, and I think it is as a poet that he will be chiefly remembered." Among the poems by Lawson cited by this critic are "The March of Ivan," "Grey Wolves, Grey," "Fighting Hard," "Song of the Dardanelles," "England Yet," and "The Star of Australasia."

That distinguished literary critic and English bookman, Edward Garnett, in one of his famous "Friday Nights," of which Lawson formed the subject of his address, thus concludes: "It may be claimed for Lawson that he, of all the Australian writers, best pictures for us and interprets democratic Australia to-day [1902], and that he is one of the very few genuinely democratic writers that the literature of 'Greater Britain' can show."

Let us now interrupt this almost universal paean of praise with a quotation from Alfred Buchanan's book, *The Real Australia*, which has a little vinegar mingled with its oil. Buchanan writes: "It may be putting a stress on the word to call Henry Lawson a poet; but a writer of many verses, some of them very good ones, he certainly is. He is a prominent figure in Australian literature, or what passes for Australian literature." [Let us stop for
a moment to assure Mr Buchanan that Australian literature is something that neither "passes" nor "has passed."

To resume: "He [Lawson] covers a great deal of ground; he is always suggestive of one country, and that country Australia; he has a great deal of talent; he is—or was—very restless and ambitious; he is extremely versatile; and after ten or twelve years' work he finds himself still pursuing editors to their sanctum and still wondering where the latest manuscript is likely to find a resting-place. [The common experience of the man of letters lost in the jungle of journalism.] . . . There is scarcely a type, or a class, or a feature in the life of his Continent about which he has not rhymed and written. The station-hand, the rouseabout, the shearer, the bullock-driver, the jackaroo, the up-country selector, the swagman, the drover, the dead-beat—he has made verses and extracted humour out of all of these, and out of many more of the same kind. He has given great ingenuity, great powers of observation, wide-reaching sympathy, and a great deal of very clever phrasing in this class of work."

So much for Mr Buchanan, who wrote during Lawson's lifetime. Now let us turn to a very
recent note, an English note, on Lawson's greatness as a master of the conte. It is highly interesting, because the editor of the English journal in which the note appeared, Now and Then, was obviously under the impression that Lawson at the time was still living. The quotation is from the Spring number of last year's date. Now and Then is, by the way, an English periodical devoted to the publishing and bookselling business. In the number cited appeared a warm appreciation of George Bourne's A Farmer's Life, and incidentally Bourne was compared with our own Henry Lawson, whose book, While the Billy Boils, had just been added to an English series, the Travellers' Library. Thus the writer in Now and Then: "I would not have supposed that someone else could have produced a genre masterpiece so soon after A Farmer's Life, but Henry Lawson in While the Billy Boils has done it for the dwellers in the Australian bush. I have been trying to find out how he does it. It seems so effortless... A book can be very good in the genre manner without equalling the masterly rightness of Lawson. He is like the poet who keeps his eye on the object. There is a deep affection binding him to his people. Each sketch and story is a little creation so economical in means and justly aligned with truth that these collections
of them become fused in a larger unity, an epical story of a people."

This criticism is no less fine than just. With the lapse of time, Lawson's fame as a great Australian writer is bound firmly to enroot itself in the hearts and the intellects of cultured humanity, for Lawson lacked no extraneous culture; he held as his Midas wealth the unhorizoned culture of the heart. His work, both in prose and poetry, is so thoroughly native of Australian soil that he must, for all time, be regarded as an outstanding interpreter of the Spirit of Australia, and a foremost writer of Australian literature of the first order.

It is necessary, in any adequate appreciation of Lawson, to insist upon the high merit of his verse no less than of his prose, notwithstanding the incomprehensible bias of the critics. All the merits of the stories are to be found in the poems, in addition to merits of their own; for the same eyes saw, the same hand wrote, the same brain conceived, and the same heart brooded over the trials and troubles and cankering cares and broken lives of those whose fates and fortunes formed the subject of his poems as well as of his prose stories and sketches. The one vehicle, no less than the other, revealed the supreme hand of a master etcher, and such cameos of character, of incident, and of dram-
atic setting and situation as "Past Carin'," "The Sliprails and the Spur," "One Hundred and Three," "Sweeney," "The Teams," "Scots of the Riverina," "The Drover's Sweetheart," "Black Bonnet," and "Talbragar," with its echoes that seem caught though not copied from Burns and Browning, are all examples of a powerful poetic quality, and justify to the full the pronouncement of St John Adcock:—"It was as a poet that Lawson first became known, and I think it is as a poet that he will be chiefly remembered."

What verdict posterity will pass on the relative merit of his prose and verse we are powerless to prophesy; but the Australian of to-day buys his verse in preference to his prose, as book sales conclusively prove, reads and learns it by rote, and recites it in the thousand thousand homes that dot the broad bosom of the continent.

Remembering the fine stanzas addressed to Charles Dickens by his Californian admirer and disciple, we may venture to imagine that were Bret Harte to revisit the glimpses of the moon as the guest at some Australian wayside fire, where teamsters gather and tramp-weary swagmen rest, such verse as he might write as a tribute to the genius of the scene would bear the title of "Lawson in
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Camp"—the salute of one singer of the road to the songs of a brother poet.

It is hard to refrain from further quotation from Professor Saillens who wrote a preface to a French version of Lawson’s stories, published in Paris in 1909—over twenty years ago:

Henry Lawson [wrote the Professor], Australian poet, and story-teller in prose, is now firmly established as the most popular author in British Australasia—I agree in the verdict I have had from all the Australians while living among the people of the Commonwealth that Lawson’s popularity is well won and bound to endure. He is not only the most popular author in Australasia, he is also (as does not necessarily follow) the best.

I will go further. His work merits a place, no doubt modest, and yet honourable, on the roll of Anglo-Australian literature. Even the Europeans, to whom Australian life and thought are matters of indifference, may find the literary pleasure that they love from perusing his tales and poems. . . . He is an artist—not fully-recognized as such by even his Australian readers. They have keen appreciation of the local subject matter and atmosphere of his stories in particular, but the hidden might of his art is still to be revealed. Of course, his great natural talent is incontestable. Great London critics, disdainful enough of “colonial” literature, have not hesitated to compare Lawson, in the short story, to Bret Harte, to Gorki, or even to our own Maupassant. The line of criticism is high. A realist, indeed, with the intense realism of the Anglo-Saxons, Lawson possesses true narrative genius; he allows nothing to divert the reader’s attention from the story to the personality of the writer.

One might easily be led to believe that Lawson is an imitator of Kipling’s methods. Fallacy! . . . If we would compare Lawson with some one, would give him a kinsman in the European literary family, we must place him with Gorki.

Australians are proud of Lawson, and well they may be. His name may become more widely known than that of
many an Australian statesman, though the latter alone will have his statue in Sydney or Melbourne. But are Australians as grateful to him as they should be? Do they realize that in coming years, when the sons of their sons will desire to live again the heroic period of Australia-in-the-making, when they will want to know about the old bush and the early efforts of Socialism, and the bringing into the world of their Commonwealth, they will find no documents more inspiring and pathetic, more full of the dream and the suffering of the past, than the poems and stories of this ill-fated Bushman.

Thus far the French appreciation—true criticism, inasmuch as its appeal is to Lawson’s countrymen, as well as to cultured humanity the wide world over. The critic wanting in love and friendship for his fellows has no rational standing: his arguments are those of a Shylock, pleading his own cause before a Court, every member of which is an Antonio at heart. The only thoroughly hateworthy rascal in the Iliad was Thersites, the Cain of Homer’s Greekdom, who could, with his critical axe, quite as enjoyably have mince-meatized the maker of the Epic as Gifford did Keats, as Lockhart did Shelley, as Jeffrey did Burns, and as certain alleged Australians did essay to treat Lawson. Some among these, in comment on Mr Ifould’s arraignment of Lawson’s title to post-mortem fame, pled piteously that the poet who had left us be not placed upon a pedestal—as though Australia had so many poets worthily so to place, or so many pedestals upon which worthily so to place them.
Wherever throughout the many-nationed earth the questing Scot may wander, he carries the verses of Burns in his memory, the dear love of Robbie in his heart, and in his pocket-book the plan for the raising of a statue, in brotherly association with a spare bank-note for its realization. Such a statue, and a beautiful statue it is, lifts its radiant, artistic head in Sydney’s Domain—and we thank the high benignity of Apollo, and the sweet favour of the Nine Muses, that a statue of Henry Lawson, the Australian counterpart of Burns in the hearts of his countrymen, will have its place in the land that Lawson loved and sang—and a noble statue will it be, modelled by the hands, and forethoughted by the artistic brain, of that lately dead genius whose art was evoked by the Spirit of Australia, a country to which he did not owe his birth, but in which his inspiration was nurtured to maturity and fruitage, the country to which he returned to continue his labours, and from which he passed to the Elysium of the Immortals—that wonderfully gifted painter, draughtsman, designer, and sculptor, George Lambert. The only bust of Lawson from the life, executed by the late Nelson Illingworth, was, by the way, used by Lambert as a model.

A literary and spiritual statue to his memory
has been fashioned no less nobly by another hand: to wit, that of the late David McKee Wright, himself a gifted singer, who wrote a finely sympathetic and psychically understanding preface to a volume of *Selected Poems* by Henry Lawson, published by Angus and Robertson in 1918. This preface is much too lengthy for quotation; but some passages dealing with Lawson's literary characteristics, and his national significance as an Australian poet, can be quoted. Picturing the fortunes and the future of the New Britons settled 'neath the Southern Cross, McKee Wright declares:

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...[the] one alone [who] 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 lyricists. 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 blazes 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 . . . that goes straight to the heart. . . .

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; judged 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.

Thus concludes McKee Wright's preface; but the section here given is only a small part of a noble and eloquent tribute from one singer to another. Since this was written, both Lawson and McKee Wright have crossed the barrier and joined the Choir Invisible.

In a number of the criticisms quoted to-night passing reference has been made which compared Lawson to Bret Harte, as a prose story-teller of a similar genius. This seems to be an erroneous comparison between writers who approached one the other only incidentally, inasmuch as each dealt
with phases of pioneer life. Essentially, Bret Harte was a man different altogether from Lawson. In the latter there was to the end a quality somewhat naive and boyish—a more than considerable spice of Peter Pan. Bret Harte was sophisticated to the finger-tips. He had the versatile American training that makes of any man a potential archangel. Newspaper-scribe, editor of various journals and magazines, secretary of a government department, mining and financial speculator, verse-writer, story-writer, novelist, dramatist, lecturer, man of affairs, United States consul at Glasgow—Bret Harte was everything that Lawson was not.

Above all, in the Bret Hartean short story he was a sentimentalist who metaphorically held a moist handkerchief bedewed with the tears of Amelia Sedley, or any other heroine of the Della Cruscans of the mid-Victorian period. Lawson had pathos, the pathos of the heart, the pathos of Nature; but it degenerated never into a sophisticated sentimentality, which only too often hurts the sensibilities of the reader as something artificial and insincere. Bret Harte must not be too severely condemned, however, for he caught the infection from Dickens, from Thackeray, from Bulwer-Lytton—the English kings of fiction in the age in which he wrote. Moreover, as far as cultural equipment
was implicated, Bret Harte was a professional Don of the World's Wide-awake University, and (to use a Lawsonian phrase) could "run rings round" the Australian poet, notwithstanding the fact that when Bret Harte died he was as poor as the proverbial church mouse. As Professor Saillens might say, as he did say concerning the comparison of Lawson with Kipling; a like comparison of Lawson with Bret Harte is, tersely and abruptly, "Fallacy!"

Lawson's name is refused a place on the scroll of Australian literature by his superfine critics, on the ground that he voiced the emotions of a class—the rank and file of "My Army, O My Army"—rather than of a nation—or, at least, that is one of the reasons given, apart from the alleged rudeness and crudity of his verse-form. But what a class! what a toiling universe of sorrow-smitten men and women found an utterance through his verse! It has been said that Lawson, when a lad, was caught in the spell of Socialism. That may be, but he never altered. In one of his poems written in later life he declared that he was "too old to rat."

Standing by himself, representing himself alone, echoing nobody, Lawson, as the Poet of the People, was blood-brother of Burns, of Ber-
anger, of Walt Whitman (the poet of widest de-
mocracy), and, in a narrower sense, of Kipling
(who voiced the emotions of the common soldier),
of Bret Harte (who typified all the workers in
mining-shafts under the generic name of “Jim of
Virginia”), of Frédéric Mistral, the barber poet of
Provence, and of many other singers of humanity,
whose verse-beats, no matter how crude and irre-
gular, are the veritable heart-throbs of a mighty
multitude of the struggling, striving, helpless and
hopeless, yet helpful and hopeful, in despite of
fate and ill-fortune. 'Tis of such that Lawson is
the impassioned and living voice. His politics were
vague and indeterminate; his sympathies were as
wide as the continent. Useless to say that he sang
of a phase now passed; for though superficial con-
ditions may change, the basic state of human social
life appears to be immovable and everlasting—
cloud-forms fade, but the firmament is eternal.

Lawson's voice is often hoarse with emotion, in-
coherent through sheer sympathy, denunciatory of
shams and of shames as a Hebrew prophet, fore-
telling the future with the eerie vision of a seer.
His long rhythms suggest the swagman’s swing-
ing stride across the wide spaces of this mighty
continent. Not Australian! He is as Australian as
Nature is Australian in this old, old new land, into
which the old problems of the civilized past have been so newly carried across the wide tides of ocean. Lawson is not the Australian of a passing phase, or of a phase already past, because the problem he faced, humanity's insistent and persistent problem, is universal and eternal; hence Lawson is both Australian and cosmic. His roughly hewn verses, surcharged with passion and sincerity, with scorn and sympathy, are finer and grander than the stanzas, highly wrought and musically modulated, of some delicate manipulator of the architectonics of an exquisite style, even as Nature is finer and grander than Art, for Lawson is a Realist with a soul, not an exhaustively cultivated Expressionist of mellifluous moods and deft experiments in vocal tapestry.

The inability to enjoy the verse of this Australian poet argues a literary culture and an aesthetic taste far too eclectic for human nature's daily food. The all-embracing mind of a true lover of poetry would be so splendidly equipoised, so admirably equipped, that it would include, in the wide ambit of its aesthetic enjoyment, the homely humour and shrewd knowledge of human nature of Chaucer, the gorgeously versified pictorial arras of Spenser, the multitudinous variety and soul-searching insight of Shakespeare, the organ grandeur and immortal sublimity of Milton, the mordant and logical satire
of Dryden, the cruel and biting irony of Swift, the keen and wicked wit of Pope, the storm-draped and sombre egotism of Byron, the spectral and moonlit loveliness of Shelley, the romantic and magical weirdness of Coleridge, the rapt and classical beauty of Keats, the profound sympathy and nature worship of Wordsworth, the alliterative charm and vocal rhapsody of Swinburne, the cunning craftsmanship and musical modulation of Tennyson—the maker in excelsis of aesthetic verse—the mad diablerie of the author of “Tam o’ Shanter”—and then, still find in the poetry of Henry Lawson somewhat of appeal and enthrallment as that of the new voice of a new land, acclaiming with widest encircling sympathy, ringing reverberently with a new note of hope, the clarion song of universal Mateship.

Victor Hugo, apostrophizing the third Napoleon, thundered: “Thou shalt not enter History!” Like the resplendent archangel Gabriel, with his sword of flame, on guard at the eastern gate of Eden, barring the entrance against our first parents after the Fall, some purblind critics in Lawson’s own Australia, shout with raucous voice, “Thou shalt not enter into the exclusive Paradise of Australian Literature!” They shout too late! Henry Lawson sits already there, enthroned as one of the Immortals.
HENRY LAWSON AND HIS CRITICS: AN ADDRESS