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A Note on the Text

The VCE English text list does not specify an edition of Lawson's stories for study. This text guide gives quotations and page references relevant to *The Penguin Henry Lawson Short Stories*, edited by John Barnes. Although page numbers obviously will vary according to the particular edition of the stories used, variations in the text will be slight.

INTRODUCTION

Henry Lawson's short stories are some of the most famous and critically acclaimed in Australian literature. They were written during one of the most turbulent and pivotal times in Australian history: the 1890s and the early 1900s. This was the time of Federation, when the six self-governing colonies of the British Empire decided to come together, establishing the Australian nation on 1 January, 1901. Debates about the nature and future of Australian society were vigorous and diverse, and Australian writing and painting flourished as never before. It was also a time of hardship. The prosperous 1880s had given way to economic depression and a long, crippling drought in the 1890s. Many people who had been well-off suddenly became poor, and those in rural or outback regions had few certainties or comforts.

These stories reflect many aspects of Lawson's own times, and of the places and people he knew from personal experience. His accounts of bush and outback life in colonial Australia are a rich source of images and ideas about Australia's national identity. Lawson's distinctive, iconic characters have become part of the national mythology: the spirited, resourceful bushwoman in 'The Drover's Wife'; the larrikin bushman and raconteur, Jack Mitchell; the earnest and tender-hearted Joe Wilson; and the affectionate but misguided retriever in 'The Loaded Dog'.

Lawson's sympathies lie not with the aristocratic squatter but with the struggling selector and the indefatigable drover; in other words, with those of limited means who never shirk hard, physical work and never fail to help a mate. They are also with the wife and mother who raises the children, runs the family farm and survives floods, droughts, disease, loneliness and the inevitable drunk or desperate 'sundowner'. Lawson's characters have a dry but indomitable sense of humour. They are practical and realistic, compassionate but with little tolerance for the sentimental or romantic.

The characters in these stories gain much of their dignity, and their enduring presence in Australian culture, from their willingness to treat their fellow men and women as their equals. This is known as the egalitarian bush ethos, and even in contemporary, cosmopolitan Australia it continues to be invoked and celebrated. However mythical it may be, the spirit of bush egalitarianism and the associated masculine ideal of mateship are at their most recognisable and compelling in Lawson's short stories.

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

Henry Lawson's stories engage closely with many of the prevalent issues of their own time, and were popular with readers for that reason. Some knowledge of the society and ideas of late nineteenth-century Australia makes reading the stories more meaningful and rewarding; brief notes about this period are included below. Lawson also drew on his own experiences for material for his fiction, and we first consider some of the intersections between Lawson's life and his preoccupations as a writer.

Biographical Details

Henry Lawson was born in 1867 at Grenfell, on the NSW goldfields. His father, Niels Larsen, was a Norwegian sailor who settled in Australia during the gold rushes, and registered his name as Lawson.¹ For most of Lawson's childhood his parents lived on a selection at New Pipeclay, near Mudgee in central NSW. His story 'A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father' is at least partly based on the family's circumstances during these years. Many other stories, including the Joe Wilson sequence, are set in the country around Mudgee and Gulgong.

Early Successes

In 1883 Lawson's parents separated; his mother, Louisa, moved to Sydney and Henry soon joined her. Louisa Lawson became a prominent publisher and writer. Through his mother, Henry gained familiarity with the radical ideas and political movements of the day, including feminism and republicanism. Louisa encouraged her son's early attempts at writing and published his first collection of stories.

Lawson initially worked as a coach-painter but soon began publishing poems and stories, especially with the *Bulletin* magazine. In the 1890s Lawson worked as a journalist, travelling to Western Australia, Brisbane and later New Zealand. He established his reputation as a poet, but his attention increasingly turned towards the particular demands and possibilities of the short story.

The concerns of Lawson's writing reflect his childhood experiences of the

¹ Alternatively, John Barnes claims that Lawson's mother 'changed the family name when registering her son's birth in 1867' (See Barnes's 'Introduction' to *The Penguin Henry Lawson*, pp.5-6).

bush as well as social and political ideas promoted by the *Bulletin*, such as Australian nationalism and the fascinations of life in the bush and the outback. The editor of the *Bulletin*, J. F. Archibald, encouraged and partly funded Lawson's trip to Bourke and throughout northwest New South Wales in the summer of 1892-93. This provided Lawson with his only experience of the outback, which he found to be harsh and desolate. Lawson's journalist's eye for detail enabled him to transform the characters and incidents he observed into finely crafted stories such as 'The Union Buries Its Dead' and 'On the Edge of a Plain'.

Marriage

Lawson's most successful period was from 1896 to 1902. In 1896 the famous collection of stories *While the Billy Boils* was published, including 'The Drover's Wife' and 'The Union Buries Its Dead'. Also in this year, Lawson married Bertha Bredt, whom he had met in the previous year.

Some idea of the qualities of the marriage may be drawn from the Joe Wilson stories. In 1916 Lawson said that: 'Mrs Joe Wilson was ... a portrait of Mrs Henry Lawson (as I idealized her then)'.² Bertha Lawson's background was German, and Joe Wilson observes that 'Mary was German in figure and walk' (in "Water Them Geraniums", p.146). However, unlike the Wilsons, Henry and Bertha never took up a selection — in this, the characters' lives mirror those of Lawson's parents.

Lawson's own personality is reflected in his character, Joe Wilson. In 'Joe Wilson's Courtship', Joe thinks he was 'born a poet by mistake' (p.168), and his fondness for alcohol is introduced apologetically: 'I only drank because I felt less sensitive, and the world seemed a lot saner and better and kinder when I had a few drinks' (p.170). Later, Joe's drinking is a contentious point between the married couple in "Water Them Geraniums", just as Lawson's alcoholism led to problems in his own marriage.

In 1900, Henry, Bertha and their two children travelled to London, searching for a wider audience for Lawson's writing. At first the trip was successful: the collection *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, including the Joe Wilson quartet and 'The Loaded Dog', was published in London in 1901. By the following year, though, the marriage was failing and the family returned to Sydney.

² Cited in the entry 'Wilson, Joe' in Wilde *et al* (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1991, p.751.

Lawson's Decline

In the last twenty years of his life, Lawson wrote little of lasting significance. He separated from his wife and children in 1902, and in subsequent years was imprisoned on several occasions for failing to meet maintenance payments. He suffered from alcoholism and spent time in mental institutions. However, his fame and recognition continued, and when he died in 1922 Lawson was the first Australian writer to be granted a state funeral. His face appeared on the ten-dollar note when decimal currency was introduced in 1966, a sign of his central and lasting importance to Australian culture.

The Bulletin Magazine

Perhaps the most important influence on Lawson's writing career was the *Bulletin* magazine. This weekly magazine was established in 1880 and achieved great success during the 1890s, when its circulation was around 80,000 copies. It promoted new Australian writers of fiction and nonfiction and championed Australian lifestyles and attitudes, as opposed to British models of society and culture. The *Bulletin*, recommending that Australia look after its own interests supported the republican movement of the 1890s (which was, of course, unsuccessful, as it was again at the end of the twentieth century).

The *Bulletin* regarded the bush as the source of key Australian values. This 'bush ethos' entailed such attributes as equality between men (egalitarianism), male mateship, and a stoic fortitude — the ability to endure hardship without much complaint, with the aid of a wry sense of humour and the willingness to help one's fellow man. The *Bulletin* promoted the formation of a national literature, especially in the early 1900s, following Federation. The bush ethos played a central role in the way this literature was envisaged. As well as publishing poems and stories by writers like Lawson, Barbara Baynton and 'Banjo' Paterson, the *Bulletin* published books about bush life such as Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection* (1899) and Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903), which have become Australian literary classics.

The Bulletin's Motto: 'Australia for the White Man'

The nationalist agenda advanced by the *Bulletin* was consistent with the White Australia policy adopted by the first Federal government, and was particularly hostile towards Aboriginal and Chinese people. For many years the *Bulletin's* motto was: 'Australia for the White Man', until in 1960 the magazine's new editor, Donald Horne, removed it.

In Lawson's stories, the expression of anti-Chinese and anti-Aboriginal sentiments can suggest that Lawson himself held these views. Although this may well have been the case, a character's or narrator's opinion is not necessarily that of the author. Chinese characters barely figure in the stories set for study. However, in a later story, 'Ah Soon', the narrator does seem to be Lawson himself, and he makes a quite definite statement:

I am anti-Chinese as far as Australia is concerned; in fact, I am all for a White Australia. But one may dislike, or even hate, a nation without hating or disliking an individual of that nation.... I never knew or heard of a Chinaman who neglected to pay his debts ... or was not charitable when he had the opportunity.³

Here, Lawson's opinion of Chinese people includes a certain amount of tolerance, but the overall view of Australian national identity is strongly Anglo-centric.

Louisa Lawson and the Dawn

The *Dawn* was a monthly women's magazine, established and edited by Louisa Lawson; it ran from 1888 to 1905. It was the first Australian feminist magazine, and it employed women whenever possible. The *Dawn* advocated social and political reform in such areas as divorce law and women's suffrage (NSW women obtained the right to vote in 1902). Alongside the *Dawn*'s radical feminist commentaries were more conservative columns about how women could look good and enjoy married life.

Henry Lawson was aware of the feminist movement, and his stories include a number of strong and capable women characters, such as the woman in 'The Drover's Wife', Brighten's sister-in-law, and Mary Wilson and Mrs Spicer in the Joe Wilson sequence. However, these women are not politically active, or even members of the paid workforce, and some critics have criticised Lawson's representations of women as being too limited in their conceptions of women's lives and roles.

The Depression of the 1890s

In the late 1880s the international price of wool, which was crucial to Australia's economic fortunes, fell dramatically. This followed a period of

³ 'Ah Soon' is from the sequence 'Elder Man's Lane', published in the *Bulletin* between 1912 and 1920; reprinted in Cecil Mann (ed.), *Henry Lawson's Best Stories*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1966, pp.249-54.

prosperity witnessed to the undertaking of many major nation-building projects, such as the construction of railways, roads, and irrigation schemes. However, when the wool price dropped, British banks withdrew the money they had placed in Australian banks, leading to a severe economic depression. Historian Jenny Lee notes that: 'In April-May of 1893, 13 of the 16 major banks suspended business'.⁴ Lawson alludes to this situation in 'Telling Mrs Baker': the 'world might wobble and all the banks go bung' (p.197). Lawson himself was one of the victims of the depression; he struggled for a time to find work as a journalist in the early 1890s, and he writes about others trying to survive in desperate circumstances from a sympathetic standpoint.

The depression demonstrated how intimately connected Australia's economy was to overseas interests and finances. Some people thought that the solution to this 'problem' was for Australia to become much more isolated from the international economy. These issues are remarkably similar to contemporary anxieties about globalisation and debates about the relative merits of free trade versus tariff protection for national economies. Then, as now, there were many conflicting opinions and no guarantees of economic security.

Workers and Unions

One of Lawson's prevailing concerns is the struggle for existence of ordinary, working people, and their awareness of social inequities. Some of Lawson's poems forcibly express some of these concerns; 'Faces in the Street', for instance, describes the plight of poor people in cities and imagines an imminent revolution. However, Lawson's stories do not generally advocate radical change in the workplace or to the distribution of wages. In fact, Lawson makes a virtue out of his characters' difficulties, valorising their lack of pretence and material comforts.

The trade union movement had a considerable impact on politics and employer-employee relations in the 1800s, and the number of unions and union memberships increased significantly during this time. But in the 1890s two factors led to a decline in union power. One factor was the depression; the other was the defeat of unions in major disputes. Employers wanted the right to employ non-union labour, while unions wanted to protect the pay and conditions of all employees by unionising workplaces. Governments tended to side with employers, especially when export contracts were at

³ See the entry 'Depressions' in Davison *et al* (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2001, pp.183-85.

risk. The most significant event was the Maritime Strike in 1890, in which miners and shearers supported the maritime unions. Eventually picket lines were disrupted by special police forces and troops, and the union campaign was defeated in the courts.⁵

The decline of the unions during the 1890s is reflected in 'The Union Buries Its Dead', which could be read as a metaphor for the unions assessing their damages after an especially militant period. In the story the union makes possible a funeral for one of its workers in a town in which he is not well known. Although the ceremony brings together members of the local community, the story suggests that ordinary outback people were mostly indifferent to union concerns and politics-and that the unions, in turn, were somewhat remote from the actual lives of the workers.

Squatters and Selectors

The squatters possessed most of the best farming land in the colonies, and they also held a great deal of political power. Squatting entailed the occupation of vacant Crown land for cattle and sheep grazing. Although initially squatting was illegal, it was effectively legalised when governments imposed an annual licence fee on squatters (from 1837 in NSW).

Many people felt that squatters had unfair access to land. The Selection Acts (passed in 1861 in NSW) were designed to 'open up' land for less affluent farmers, who could purchase their 'selected' land by time-payment. In contrast to the squatters, selectors tended to obtain poorer land and had little money to invest in their land or even to live on. Lawson's stories express approval of the hard-working, egalitarian ethos of the selectors, but are contemptuous of the aristocratic pretensions of the squatters.

Lawson and 'Banjo' Paterson: the Bulletin Debate

Alongside Henry Lawson, the other most famous name from the turn of the twentieth century is A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson, who wrote such well-known ballads as 'The Man from Snowy River', 'Clancy of the Overflow' and 'Waltzing Matilda'. Paterson published poetry about the bush in the *Bulletin*, using the pen name 'The Banjo'. His background was more privileged than Lawson's; he grew up on a station near Yass (in NSW) and later worked as a solicitor in Sydney.

⁵ See 'Maritime Strike' in Davison *et al* (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, p.414.