

The Status of the Aborigine in the Writing of Henry Lawson

A Reconsideration

HENRY LAWSON'S treatment of racial difference has drawn significant criticism over the last 30 years or so as successive generations of critics have sought to expose the racist assumptions embedded in some of this country's most cherished myths. W.H. Pearson's *Henry Lawson Among Maoris* (1968) and Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia* (1970) probed the 'intelligent and sensitive Australian writer's' failure to extend his sympathies to other colours and other cultures (Pearson, p. xv).¹ In more recent times journalists and academics have revisited the subject by interpreting the renaissance of racial politics in this country as a return to the older mono-cultural Australia, for which they imagine Henry Lawson as a standard bearer.

The *Australian* newspaper's Paul Kelly characterised the new 'racist' and anti-intellectual political force mobilised by Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party as 'an echo of our Anglo-Celtic origins; the claims of the once mighty bush to define the Australian Legend; a descendant of the romanticism and racism of Henry Lawson whose hold on national identity was once so comprehensive ... the latest manifestation of our reflex to distrust authority, abuse our elites and damn our leaders'.² Some academic responses have also flirted with this ethically weighted opposition between Anglo-Celtic culture and Aboriginal or multicultural Australia. One of Richard Nile's contributions to the (re)collection of essays, *The Australian Legend and Its Discontents*, for example, associates Henry Lawson with a form of the Australian Legend which helped to license a narrow and outdated version of Australianness.

There is not much doubt that some dissatisfaction with this negative turn in the reputation of Henry Lawson is one of the motivations behind Geoffrey Blainey's recent high-profile collection of his work. In his introduction the celebrated historian makes some concessions to critics of Lawson's racial attitudes, but he doesn't entirely capitulate:

Of course he had his prejudices, and they were widely shared by his readers. He was capable of offering over simple stereotypes about races and nations ... In his concept of the universal brotherhood, he excluded the Chinese and probably most Aborigines but gladly embraced the American blacks. He is now looked down upon as racist by many historians and critics, some of whom, without realising it, are less compassionate and more sympathetic to racial stereotypes than he was. (Blainey, p. xxvii)

However, in spite of this parting shot and his view that 'Lawson's writings are important, partly because they focus on vital struggles in Australian history', Blainey does not choose to republish the material which is interested in race relations.

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Lawson's treatment of the indigene is generally considered as scant and for the most part it is consistent with the conventions of his time. Certainly, as a writer whose living depended upon his relationships with the editors of a variety of newspapers and magazines, as well as a dispersed national audience, he had to show some respect for the ideas which were current. Henry Reynolds' account of the fate of those who tried to too vigorously protest on behalf of the indigene in this period makes it clear how disastrous the consequences could be for a professional writer.³ When A.J. Vogan represented the callous slaughter of the indigenous Australians by the Queensland Native Police in his 1891 novel, *Black Police*, for example, it 'virtually closed [his] newspaper life in Australia'. 'I wrote upon the unpleasant subject,' he wrote to the Aborigines Protection Society, 'out of a sense of duty I owed to my fellow countrymen ... But it has done me such harm here—this meddling with the pet national sin of Australia that I am forced to seek fresh pastures'.⁴

Lawson's studies of the frontier tend to feature indigenous subjects rather conventionally as markers of the distance of civilisation. In the sketches 'Hungerford' and 'In a Dry Season', which were products of Lawson's famous trip to Bourke in 1892, 'black' trackers feature as picturesque signs of the frontier. In the stories of selection life such as 'The Drover's Wife', 'Middleton's Peter', 'A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek', 'Water them Geraniums', and 'No Place for a Woman' they fulfil the roles of casual labourers, trackers, occasional domestic help and midwives. On occasion credit is paid to their uncanny effectiveness;⁵ however, even in such cases they represent the threatening absence of society and its associated services. The presence of Aborigines in much of Lawson's fiction suggests his view that the bush was indeed 'no place for a woman,' which of course meant that it was no place for a married man or a family. It is the lack of civilisation that sends people mad in the bush and the Aborigines are expressive signs of what for the most part is an unfortunate lack of development.

At first glance then, Henry Lawson's representation of the indigene seems to invest in each of the three categories which Ian McLean has used to identify nineteenth-century responses to the native population. According to McLean the Aborigines were represented throughout the nineteenth century by a set of recurring tropes that successively justified exploration, invasion and then settlement. Initially the invaders used what he describes as a grotesque aesthetic to transform the natives into demons who had to be exorcised by the representatives of a coming civilisation. Settlers safely following along behind the violent frontier were free to nostalgically appreciate the picturesque beauty of the indigenes as their more enlightened civilisation supplanted exotic natives who were sadly disappearing into history. The Aborigines whom the settlers encountered as the frontier moved west might have been in the same space as the European but they were in a different time. The colonists' brief was to usher in a new age through cultivation and dispossession and yet memories of the land's first inhabitants 'lingered as if ghosts forever haunting the psyche of the nation... The once dreary featureless bush now teemed with spirits and history, making this *new* country the most *ancient* land, and giving its new owners a new indigenous identity'.⁶

Lawson's reactionary temperament, his class position and its tortured relation to the cultural industries of his time, as well as his literary technique, however, make him an unsatisfactory candidate for cleanly-cut categories. In this essay I want to argue that we can get a better sense of Lawson's ambivalent representation of the Aborigine from three prose accounts in which he deals substantively with the topic. These stories are 'The Bush Undertaker', 'Black Joe' and 'King Billy'. A close analysis of this work shows that Lawson still has a lot to offer contemporary historians interested in the 'vital struggles' between natives and the settler-invaders.

'The Bush Undertaker'

'The Bush Undertaker' is the most famous of these stories and it is a significant omission from Blainey's selection because it is the only story which deals substantially with settler-native relations, which has made it into the received canon of Lawson's 'best work'. In this story the 'hatter', a bushman disorientated by his isolation, amuses himself during a hot Australian Christmas by excavating a 'blackfellow's' skeleton from its native grave in the Bush. During the recovery he stumbles upon another corpse which turns out to be that of his friend 'Brummy'. The hatter attempts to recover both the skeleton and the corpse and the story then turns on the different treatment of the two sets of remains and an irritating 'black' goanna, which haunts the 'hatter'.⁷ The blackfellow's skeleton (which is of course white) is recovered as a collector's curiosity; while the white man's corpse (which is now 'black' from decomposition) is returned for what passes in the 'grand Australian bush' for a proper Christian burial. The confusion of colour which marks the two sets of remains reveals the arbitrariness of a distinction which allows science to claim the one, and religion the other.

Historically this story has been read as a study of the maddening effects of loneliness on the isolated shepherd. More recent interest in the dispossession of the indigenes during colonial settlement and the role played in that process by the widespread collection of Aboriginal remains and artefacts have enabled different interpretations.⁸ The historian Tom Griffiths has argued that 'the collector's interest in [indigenous] culture was as a dead culture, a relic, ornamental culture, a culture that could be picked up, displayed like a trophy, worn or discarded like a coat'.⁹ Like the old hatter in Lawson's story, collectors did not want to recognise the Aborigine as a subject because 'it would turn their detached "science" into a disturbing humanities'.¹⁰ Collectors and their collections played a significant role in stripping the landscape of the material evidence of its original inhabitants and helped to legitimise the social Darwinist view that the inferior native was inevitably – even if lamentably – passing into history.

Lawson's 'The Bush Undertaker' is a very important historical document for the current racial debates in this country. It is important because it demonstrates that even in the late nineteenth century there was an awareness of the arbitrariness of western epistemological categories. There was awareness, too, that the failure of the settler population to deal justly with the original inhabitants was a root cause of the

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newcomers' uneasy relationship with a land they were often to imagine as haunted. 'The Bush Undertaker' reminds us that:

doubts about the legitimacy of the European settlement of Australia are not purely modern, as some historians and many politicians would have us believe. Such concerns are not just the fashionable sensitivities of the so-called politically correct 1990s; they have a long and intriguing history; they are the emotional burden of Australian settlement; they are the recurrent inescapable shadows and spectres of colonial experience.¹¹

There are two other Lawson texts on this subject which deserve to be more widely known. One is the story 'Black Joe'; the other a journalistic piece called 'King Billy' which is held in manuscript in the Lothian Papers.

'Black Joe'

In 'Black Joe', Lawson's adult narrator fondly recalls a childhood friendship with an Aboriginal boy and his family. The world of Black Joe is an inviting one for his white friend and the two boys share their enjoyment of the bush. Black Joe and White Joe are not equal in the bush, however, and Black Joe instructs White Joe in the native skills which enable them to live off the environment. Black Joe's blackness is imagined as the combination of his activities in 'shepherding, 'possum and kangaroo hunting, crawfishing, sleeping and various other occupations and engagements with that of burning off'.¹² White Joe's whiteness on the other hand is connected with his being a 'sickly town boy', though the colour difference was not so marked at times because of both boys' interests in 'burning off' and their mutual disinterest in 'cold water'.

The white child's respect for the black child's native bushmanship is extended to his native family:

Black Joe's father, old Black Jimmie, lived in the gunyah on the rise at the back of the sheepyards, and shepherded for my uncle. He was a gentle good-humoured easy-going fellow with a pleasant smile; which description applies, I think, to most old blackfellows in civilisation. I was very partial to the old man, and chummy with him, and used to slip away from the homestead whenever I could, and squat by the campfire along with the other piccaninnies, and think, and yarn socially with Black Jimmie by the hour. I would give something to remember those conversations now. Sometimes somebody would be sent to bring me home, when it got too late, and Black Jimmie would say:

Piccaninnie alonga 'possum rug," and there I'd be, sound asleep, with the other young Australians.

I liked Black Jimmie very much, and would willingly have adopted him as a father. I should have been quite content to spend my days in the scrub, enjoying life in dark and savage ways, and my nights "alonga 'possum rug," but the family had other plans for my future.¹³

The reader does not have to be aware of Lawson's chronic sense of familial and social alienation to understand his attraction to this acceptance into the extended family of

Black Jimmie. This momentary approval of indigenous community, however, needs to be qualified. Black Joe and Black Jimmie serve to initiate White Joe into their native acceptance and understanding of place and this enables the white man to become a legitimate heir to their legacy. As Ian McLean points out, this is a familiar trope of colonialist discourse. The ultimate death of Black Joe, the passing of his tribe, and the romantic lament for the demise of the noble savage's culture are common Social Darwinist conventions. And there are other conventionally racist episodes such as the picturesque description of the indigine's ridiculous customs and patronising recollections of their different responses to the settler culture.

And yet there remains in this story a number of recurrent Lawson themes and characteristic habits of expression that spin the narrative in ways for which we ought to account. The description of the violent tribal ordeal which Black Jimmie undertakes to win his bride (the two suitors take turns to beat each other over the head with clubs), is subverted, in Lawson's customary fashion, by the narrative reflection that 'you couldn't take everything my Uncle's brother said for granted' (p. 254).¹⁴ And it is hard (now, at least) not to see a trace of sarcasm in the reference to the arbitrariness of 'civilisation', when the death of the entire family is recognised as a symptom of colonial history: 'The four little Australians ... died out one by one, as blacks do when brought within the ever widening circle of civilisation' (p. 255).

The story also revisits Lawson's concern for the violent imposition of the adult world of work upon the fragile innocence of childhood. The two boys in this story often enjoy the bush as an escape from work and white parental authority duly responds with corporeal punishment. The freedom and happiness associated with harmony in the environment is like the health of native Australians in that it is seen to be incompatible with the working world of white civilisation. The European culture which is synonymous with civilisation is materially productive but this productiveness fails to provide the sense of fulfilment found in romantic ideals of childhood and the primitivism of the native.

This 'childish' native alternative of course, is never really a serious option. It serves as a tragic device which establishes the inevitability of work and civilisation and the suffering they entail. This story is one of a number of Lawson's stories which express a fear of growing up and that fear is almost always located in a child's realisation of the destructive effects of work and its repercussions for human relationships. The relaxed community represented through Black Jimmie's extended family is clearly understood as a legacy of the native's 'good natured' rejection of the materialist objectives of European work. Lawson realised that the conditions of work within the class-based system of capitalism had little to offer the worker and the relaxed community of the native is a lamentably barren hope compromised by its location within a white boy's childhood and a black boy's culture.

Nevertheless Lawson is very careful with this story. The wry tone of the retrospective adult narrator may imply that his nostalgic recollections nevertheless recognise the impractical fantasies that are characteristic of childhood. But they are also available to read as an inditement of the failures of European civilisation to

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come to terms with a capitalist system which is the engine room of colonialism. The difference in status between the two cultures is forcibly stated in the conclusion to the narrative when White Joe's grief at the inevitably early death of Black Joe leads to his families' mistaken perception that the dead was one of their own: 'But cross-examination explained the mistake, and I retired to the rear of the pig-sty, as was my custom when things went wrong, with another cause for grief' (p. 256). This story, like 'The Bush Undertaker', explicitly focuses on the view that native Australians do not have the same value as white Australians, and that the certainties of white Australians can be undermined by the inverse mirroring of colour. In 'Black Joe', however, it is hard not to see this as a viewpoint which the narrator at least would rather not accept. Like many of Lawson's best stories the rub is in the gently ironic tone. Lawson's wry perspective provides access to cultural tensions in a way that is conducive to understanding even when it is not entirely free of the racist assumptions of its time (and ours).

'King Billy'

There are a number of different interpretative contexts that need to be distinguished here. There is the question of Lawson's inconsistent attitude to Aborigines, the question of his contemporaries' responses to his handling of the subject, and the quite separate question of how a modern Australian audience informed by public debates over the reconciliation process might respond to these narratives. While sensitive to the first two I am more interested here in the current cultural value of the stories and with this in mind I want to now turn to a little known Lawson manuscript in the Lothian Papers, which represents Lawson's attempt to cobble together within the one document a number of the references to Aborigines in his other works.¹⁵ 'King Billy' is a hybrid form of essay, sketch and story, the type of which exemplifies the ambivalent separation of fact and fiction which marks the at-times difficult to separate roles of journalism and literature in colonial literary culture.

'King Billy' is a common derogatory title for Aboriginal men in the nineteenth century. Lawson's essay tends to undermine the abstract qualities of the stereotype with a personalised and relatively liberal (for the time) appreciation of the aborigine. His account presents Aborigines as naturally talented, intelligent, kindly and good humoured, not to mention exploited, poorly, even criminally treated, and widely misunderstood. Lawson's review of racist stereotypes of the aborigine suggests their limitations even though at times it too approvingly invokes them. The end result of this expert journalist's reconsideration of the blacks, however, is an expression of sympathy and a level of understanding of their ill treatment and dispossession.

Again, this essay begins with a wry play on the distinction that must be made between black and white Australians. 'When I went to a little slab-and-bark school in the Bush I learned – from an old geography book ... that "the inhabitants of New Holland were amongst the lowest and most degraded to be found on the surface of

the Earth;" and, while attracted by the roll of the sentence, I was vaguely inclined to regard the statement as personal'.¹⁶ Lawson loved this sentence and used it several times in various reminiscences. No doubt it is intended to be funny in a racist way; though, of course it encourages uncomfortable reflections upon both the legitimacy and respectability of the colonial presence. 'Lowest and most degraded' refers to the real natives and hence reminds the settlers that they are not natives; but it might just as easily remind the colonists of convict origins which are a common presence in Lawson's work and a vexed subject for his respectable contemporaries.

What follows is a not entirely satisfactory defence of the Aborigine against this accusation. 'The blacks might be low and degraded,' he writes, 'but we forgive King Billy his dirt and laziness because of his cheerfulness and humour, which last is something akin to our own' (p. 3). Lawson goes on to describe a comically dressed Aboriginal cadging for a drink. Again, this is supposed to be funny in a racist way, but it is hard to imagine such an experienced cadger of drinks as Lawson not having some sympathy here with his subject. Certainly, he is quick to point out that native cadging is no different from settler cadging except that the native is content to stop when he has enough for the moment: 'if King Billy has sufficient for the day, he will not cadge for the morrow' (p. 4). This distinction, of course might be read as the sign of a primitive failure of foresight or alternatively as an admirable absence of greed, depending upon the reader's particular ideological disposition. Lawson, though, makes it clear that Aboriginal Australians are skilled and naturally athletic, 'so long as they are not demoralised by the bad habits of civilisation' (p. 4).

In 'King Billy' Lawson briefly revisits the story of 'Black Joe' and adds an account of 'Black Jimmy's' loyalty to his dead boss and his determination to keep his word to 'stick to him' in spite of the fears he is subjected to by his native superstitions. Lawson then recalls a native who spoke French. 'The French blackfellow', as he calls him, 'had had enough of civilisation' and 'preferred to live as his fathers lived' (p. 7). Later still he describes the way one Aboriginal knowingly poses as 'the last of his tribe' for new chums and tourists who make the venture a lucrative one for the canny native and his family. According to Lawson, there 'sometimes seems to be a touch of Scotch [and Irish] in King Billy' (p. 11). These Aborigines can be loyal, courageous, canny, intelligent, resourceful and independent.¹⁷

There are also veiled references to the atrocities committed against the native. 'The French Blackfellow's personal history, for example, is a 'strange and interesting one' in a State (Western Australia) where such things are 'veiled in obscurity, as dark as Billy Rex himself - or the history of that dark country' (p. 7). An indication of what he might mean by this is provided indirectly in the next few paragraphs in which he speculates on the 'many fine looking half-caste girls' who are left somewhere out of reach of civilisation' and 'seldom or never brought into the stations or near the camps' (p. 8). Lawson had earlier explained the increase in the half-caste population in terms of the dearth of white women in the bush. 'Things are arranged ... in connection with the native women,' he goes on to say, 'in various ways, which could not, very well, be set

B.E. Minns cartoon, *Bulletin*
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B.E. Minns cartoon, *Bulletin*,
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KING BILLY (politely raising his belltopper): "You musn't look at me like that—I'm a married man."

down here' (p. 9). Later on he describes with mock incomprehension the habit of Aborigines when coming into a station in pairs, of 'dividing into two' and moving 'abreast of each other – that is at equal distances from the homestead' all the while keeping 'half-a-mile of flat gully between them' (p. 13). According to Lawson 'there was no possible reason the white man could fathom why they couldn't walk together' (p. 13). Equally curious, was the way they would form a circle and come into the station 'from the scrub behind' when 'there was no apparent reason why they shouldn't walk up to the front door in a body' (pp. 13–14). Lawson is not following A.J. Vogan's lead in

openly exposing the murder and rape of native Australians but it is pretty clear what he is getting at and it is equally clear what he thinks of it from the way he ends his account by insisting that 'Australia will never forget the wonderful kindness of those blacks, who wept over the bodies of dead Burke and Wills, and saved King – and who would have saved the other two had they stayed with them' (p. 15).

There are plenty of occasions in these narratives and in Lawson's writing as a whole, particularly in the verse and in the work inspired by his experiences with the Maoris in Mangamaunu, New Zealand, which show that he could be as racist as any of his contemporaries. In the material inspired by his experience with the Maoris he showed, not unlike many of the contemporary supporters of Right Wing Conservatism, that he could be threatened by natives who exposed his class weaknesses. In a culture that associates power with distinction, some subjects have found it handy to have a set of scapegoats who can keep them at least one step from the bottom of the pile. Living at the beginning of the twenty-first as opposed to the twentieth century we would want to ask a great deal more of Henry Lawson than what he offers in the three narratives I have revisited here.

However, if we can be more realistic in terms of who Lawson was, what he did for a living, and where and when he lived, we might find something in his writing on native Australians that remains useful in post-modern Australia. For in spite of everything, Lawson displays a conditional level of understanding in his writing on Aborigines, which is born of his own suffering, and a sense of shared dispossession at the hands of an economically driven system of empire.¹⁸ How much better would this country be if settler Australians pursued this line of thought in their attitudes towards indigenous Australians rather than embracing the illusory comforts offered by the politics of envy? It is because Lawson experienced and represented the tensions between both these perspectives that his work remains a valuable source for the historical relationship between this country's first and its subsequent peoples.

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Notes

- 1 W.H. Pearson, *Henry Lawson Among the Maoris*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1968; Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, 1970, revised edition, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976.
- 2 Paul Kelly, 'Hanson—Symptom of a Deeper Problem,' *Two Nations*, Melbourne, Bookman, 1998, pp. 92–93.
- 3 Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, St Leonards, Allen and Unwin, 1998.
- 4 A.J. Vogan qtd in Henry Reynolds, p. 137.
- 5 See for example 'A Hero in the Dingo-Scrubs', 'No Place for a Woman' and 'The Babies in

- the Bush,' *Henry*
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- 6 Ian McLean, *Wh*
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- 7 In his 'Fragmen
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- 10 Ibid, p. 5.
- 11 Ibid, p. 3.
- 12 Henry Lawson,
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- 16 Henry Lawson,
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the Bush,' *Henry Lawson: The Master Storyteller, Prose Writings*, Colin Roderick, ed. Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1984, pp. 386–92, 393–98 and 399–410.

- 6 Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1998, p. 50.
- 7 In his 'Fragment of an Autobiography' Lawson describes a large black 'gohanna' which used to frequent the Old Bark School at Erunderee: 'On summer days he'd lay along a beam over the girl's seats, and improve his mind a little, and doze a lot. The drone of the school seemed good for his nerves. They say a black 'gohanna' haunted the tent I was born in, and I remember one in the house on the flat—I used to see the impression of his toes on the calico ceiling when he slithered along overhead. It may have been the same 'gohanna' and he might have been looking after me, but I always had a horror of reptiles.' *Henry Lawson Autobiographical and Other Writings 1887–1922*, Colin Roderick, ed., Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1972, p. 182.
- 8 See for example Christopher Lee, 'What Color are the Dead? Race and the National Gaze in Henry Lawson's "The Bush Undertaker"', *Kunapipi* 13.3 (1991) pp. 14–25; Phillip O'Neill, 'Women and Aborigines in Lawson's "The Bush Undertaker"', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 8 (1992) pp. 59–70; Robert Dingley, "'Resurrecting" the Australian Past: Henry Lawson's "The Bush Undertaker"', *The Body in the Library*, Leigh Dale and Simon Ryan, eds, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1998, pp. 155–66.
- 9 Tom Griffiths, 'The Haunted Country,' *Land and Identity: Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature 1997*, Michael Deves and Jennifer McDonnell, eds, Armidale, ASAL, 1998, p. 7.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 12 Henry Lawson, 'Black Joe', *Henry Lawson: The Master Storyteller, Prose Writings*, Colin Roderick, ed., Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1984, p. 253.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 A similar reference to the Aboriginal penchant for solving their 'sex problems with a club' goes unqualified in 'Mitchell on the "Sex" and other "Problems,"' *Henry Lawson: The Master Storyteller, Prose Writings*, Colin Roderick, ed., Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1984, p. 301.
- 15 These sources include 'Black Joe', 'A Fragment of Autobiography,' and 'The Golden Nineties'. This last and the most significant source, is a journalistic piece inspired by Lawson's trip to Western Australia that was published in 1899 in the *Australian Star*. See note accompanying 'The Golden Nineties' in *Henry Lawson: A Camp-Fire Yarn, Complete Works 1885–1900*. Leonard Cronin, ed., Sydney, Landsdowne Press, 1984, pp. 660–62.
- 16 Henry Lawson, 'King Billy' (MSS, Lothian Papers, La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, SLV) p. 1.
- 17 For a verse celebration of Aboriginal loyalty see 'The Black Tracker' in *Henry Lawson Collected Verse, Volume 1 1885–1900*. Colin Roderick, ed., Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1967, p. 77. Although here, as is often the case in the writing of the period, this positive moral quality is imagined as a 'white man's' characteristic. For example, 'But, ah! There beat a white man's heart/Beneath his old, black wrinkled hide' (p. 77).
- 18 For a verse example of Lawson drawing inspiration from the stoic dignity demonstrated by suffering Aborigines, see 'Trouble Belongit Mine' in *Henry Lawson Collected Verse, Volume 3 1910–1922*. Colin Roderick, ed., Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1969, pp. 107–08.