

Joe Wilson and His Mates is worth reading and like most important books it has a story of its own. It is the third of four books which Henry Lawson published in the United Kingdom with British publishers, and many critics consider it and the earlier collection, *While the Billy Boils* (1896), as the high points of his literary career. Most of the stories were composed in and around London between June 1900 and the middle of the following year, and they were written for a British public which was interested in the fate of fellow Britons on the colonial margins of the Empire. Lawson's earlier writing in prose was well received in Australia by readers and reviewers, and during the 1890s he enjoyed a widespread reputation as the 'voice of the bush'. But Lawson aspired after a literary reputation and many critics felt that his sparse sketches and short stories lacked the formal polish and narrative development necessary for cultural distinction. Liberal critics also took a dim view of the pessimistic realism which he used to represent the struggles of working Australians. To be seen to have developed as an artist Lawson understood that he would have to try a longer series of connected stories or a novel, and he would have to be more optimistic about the success of Australian settlement. A lack of formal education, his weakness for alcohol and an interest in reforms that might assist the hopes and aspirations of working people meant that this was not a simple task.

Joe Wilson's drinking problems become a significant issue in his marriage to Mary, and Lawson's own experience was no different when, against good advice, he married Bertha Bredt in 1896. To get her husband away from Sydney's bohemian drinking circles Bertha arranged for him to take up a teaching position at a small Maori school in Mangamaunu on New Zealand's South Island. British editors and publishers who were impressed with the material in the English edition of *While the Billy Boils* (1897) wrote to him there asking for stories which avoided 'questionable subjects' for their literary magazines (qtd by Lawson in Roderick, *Letters* 72). Lawson was encouraged by this to consider pursuing his career in England and he made a concerted attempt to put the drinking behind him and write the longer, happier story that his critics were demanding.

When Bertha fell pregnant with their first child, the Lawsons returned to Australia and back in Sydney the drinking problems resurfaced. With help from friends he was admitted to an inebriate's home for treatment and for a while he became a teetotaler and looked with renewed purpose to his literary career. He seems to have pegged his hopes of redemption upon the prospect of getting to England and in the pages of the *Sydney Bulletin* he advised 'any young Australian writer whose talents have been recognized ... to go steerage, stow away, swim, and seek London, Yankeeland, or Timbuctoo – rather than stay in Australia till his genius turned to gall, or beer' (Lawson, 'Pursuing Literature' 78). Appeals to the young Governor of New South Wales, Lord Beauchamp, and the book collector David Scott Mitchell secured funds for the English venture and after the birth of his second child early in 1900, the young family shipped for England.

The United Kingdom provided a more diverse market for writing than colonial Australia and once there Lawson quickly set about developing a series of longer, more connected stories. He was fortunate to engage the services of the literary agent J.B. Pinker, whose clients included H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, Stephen Crane, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. The arrangement provided Lawson with professional management, publication

options and the short term financial security necessary to make the most of his British opportunities. The result was 'Brighten's Sister-in-Law' and 'A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek', which Pinker soon placed with the distinguished Scottish editor and publisher William Blackwood. Lawson was working with the right people in the right place and at the right time: his literary star was waxing.

Blackwood's Magazine, or *Maga*, as it is familiarly known, was a significant outlet for anyone interested in establishing a literary reputation. Founded in 1817, the publishing house of *Blackwoods* was involved in the literary careers of writers such as Walter Scott, Thomas de Quincey, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and Joseph Conrad. In the later part of the nineteenth century the magazine demonstrated a significant interest in British colonial life and it was widely circulated throughout the Empire. David Finklestein describes *Maga's* vision of the colonial margins of Empire as 'part of a disordered universe being put right by British skill, technology and moral superiority', and this makes it an interesting location for Lawson's stories about the pressures on working men and women on the Australian frontier. *Maga* published 'Brighten's Sister-In-Law', 'A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek', 'Babies in the Bush', 'Past Carin', 'The House that was Never Built' and 'Telling Mrs Baker' between November 1900 and October 1901. In June of 1901 Blackwoods published a selection of stories from Lawson's earlier books called *The Country I Come From* and the new stories were published as *Joe Wilson and His Mates* five months later.

Some critics have looked rather hopefully at the Joe Wilson sequence in search of the longer narrative which true literary status seemed to demand and which Lawson never delivered. Today we are more content to accept them in the form which best expressed the writer's particular talent. The arrangement of stories in the collection also suggests an attempt to alternate the stories so that the Henry's controversial pessimism is balanced by Joe's nostalgic sentimentalism and the dry humor of his mates. But the tone of Lawson's retrospective narrator never lets us forget that fate will not be kind to Joe or Mary Wilson, and it is difficult to see anything much brighter for Walter Head and his wife, or even Mrs Baker. 'The Loaded Dog', 'The Golden Graveyard' and 'Jimmy Grimshaw's Wooing' may have provided Blackwood with the more 'humorous vein' of story that he was seeking but a grim understanding of the social, environmental and psychological pressures on working people continues to preoccupy the collection (Blackwood qtd in Barnes 32). *Joe Wilson and His Mates* is not the longer, more optimistic narrative that Lawson's contemporaries asked for and while it is now an important touchstone within the Australian literary canon, in 1901 it did not confirm his literary reputation in the way in which he hoped it might.

The stories that comprise *Joe Wilson and His Mates* (1901) explore the attitudes and values of working men and women who struggle to cope with the challenges of frontier life at the end of the nineteenth century. Joe and Mary Wilson hope for something better and in the nineteenth century that tended to take form as a dream of property. Land ownership is a path to prosperity and the possession of a home and family are sources of personal fulfillment and middle-class respectability. The poverty of the Wilson's selection is a marker of their social station, however, and in a country where the best land

belonged to the squatters and drought spelt ruin for the small landowner it is a reminder that the young couple are up against the odds. The situation is not much different for Joe Wilson's mates who travel a landscape that may or may not be cursed or haunted, expressing their own eccentricities and conning their fellow countrymen for the price of a beer or two wherever and whenever they can. Social class, nature, character and fortune all have a role to play in the rise and fall of these characters, and Lawson's control of tone never lets us forget that long term prosperity is perhaps a little too much to expect. *Mateship*, that hoary old Australian chestnut is there to be sure, but in the best of Lawson's stories it is often a wry condition; a booby prize for those slipping down the social ladder.

Lawson's personal life fell apart just as his literary career was achieving this 'high tide' in the pages of *Blackwood's Magazine*. The loneliness and isolation of London concentrated the pressures on his marriage, and rumors that he was neglecting his wife and drinking surfaced in Australia. One gossip columnist hinted at an affair with a servant. Bertha's second confinement was difficult and she appears to have been suffering what we would now call post-natal depression. In England her health broke down completely and she was hospitalized, suffering from 'melancholia, hallucinations and suicidal tendencies' (Sussex and Tasker 171). The family tragedy provides a suggestive biographical source for the fascination with mental illness in the collection, and the Joe Wilson stories in particular have been scrutinized for clues to the writer's domestic experiences in England. Lawson was in a difficult situation, and with the arrangement with Blackwood at an end and the English books selling poorly, he brought his disintegrating family home.

A literary appreciation by Edward Garnet in London's *Academy and Literature* shows us the way in which Lawson was sold in Britain and it is consistent with the way in which he has tended to be popularly remembered in Australia. 'Lawson's special value to us,' he wrote, 'is that he stands as the representative writer of a definitive environment, as the portrayer of life on the Australian soil, and that he brings before our eyes more fully and vividly than any other man the way the Australian people's life is going, its characteristic spirit, code, and outlook; the living thought and sensation of these tens and hundreds and thousands and millions of people who make up the Australian Democracy' (122). Liberal critics who were anxious to preserve Australia's reputation as a workingman's paradise had always been troubled by the thought that Lawson's gloomy stories might be seen as representative and Garnet understood the politics of the situation. More recent commentators have also worked hard to make identity politics an issue and Lawson has been found wanting in relation to his representation of indigenous and asian Australians. Some have even suggested that Lawson is an anachronism with nothing of importance to say to a modern multicultural nation. But those who forget the past always risk repeating it, and *Joe Wilson and His Mates* still offers a fascinating source for anyone interested in the development of Australian attitudes and values. Lawson's stories continue to remind us that our opportunities have been hard won and that ideals such as equality, mateship, social mobility and the much vaunted freedom that comes with them have complicated histories. Henry Lawson may well be our first black armband historian but his short stories have inspired successive generations of Australians to master a difficult form and

the best of them remain deft enough to defy any simplistic and unduly dismissive views of who Australians are and where they come from.

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