Lawson—Lost and Found

BARRY PLEWS

Some time ago I was working on the manuscript collection of the Mitchell Library in Sydney. I was particularly concerned with the literature written between 1880 and 1900 and published in such magazines and newspapers as The Bulletin, The Intercolonial, and The Mercator (in both Sydney and Melbourne). While looking at the relationship between that literature and the political struggles of the day, I, naturally enough, studied the work of Henry Lawson. Lawson's early verse and prose are very important for many literary and political reasons, but the point being that his early work was embedded in, and grew out of, some of the more progressive aspects of the class struggle in Australia in the late 1880s and early 1890s. His early work was written from a working-class perspective. This is one of the main reasons why bourgeois literary studies and criticism generally misconstrue or misrepresent Lawson's later work. The constant failure to identify and analyze this shift away from a working-class perspective in Lawson's later work has led many a bourgeois critic to indulge in tales of alcoholism, in colonial and intellectual 'narcissism', or the fatal disease of 'derelicting ideas', as explanations of why Lawson's work somehow declined. Such explanations stifle the symptoms without recognizing the disease.
Looking through some of Lawson’s letters I came across one which made me rather curious. In a letter dated September 27, 1882, and written from the Great Western Hotel in Bourke¹, Lawson, amongst other things, had this to say to his aunt, Emma Brooks:

> I am doing a little work, sub rosa, for the Western Herald. Will send a copy tomorrow. The editor sent for the labour leaders to give me some points for a local political piece. The chap have seen the proof and are delighted. Will make about 11 a. this week. The editor wanted to give me a notice, but I preferred to keep dark for a while. There’ll be a sensation when his paper comes out tomorrow.

Though I knew Lawson’s early verse fairly well I could not recollect a ‘local political poem’ about Bourke. I looked through the Angus and Robertson edition of Lawson’s verse² but could find nothing. I then looked through Angus and Robertson’s edition of Lawson’s letters³. The letter appears on pages 50 and 51. Then I made a mistake. I failed to look at the back of the book. If I had I would have noted on page 420, Rodrick’s note:

> M.L. MNR. A1 29. No copies of the Western Herald containing the verses referred to, appear to have survived.

And that would have been the end of it. Instead I looked up a newspaper index and discovered that the library of the University of New England was the only library in Australia holding copies of the Western Herald for the period I was interested in, and in particular for the 29th September, 1882. I wrote to the librarian, asking for a copy of all verse appearing in the Western Herald on September 29th, 1882.

Within a few days I received a reply. On September 28th only one verse appeared and it was entitled Our Numbers - Present and Future. A first reading of the photocopy provided by the library was enough to convince me that it was Lawson, even though it was published under the pen-name of “Tally”. Although the ‘proof’ of the matter took me quite some time to assemble, it was not difficult. Bill Cameron from the Bourke & District Historical Society helped as did many of the contributors to the Society’s papers. Brian Matthews lent a hand,
Tally" who wrote Our Members - Present and Future was in fact Henry Lawson. The verse is interesting from a political and historical perspective. It is located in a time when the working class in Australia were organizing themselves and engaging in fierce struggles with the local bourgeoisie and the British imperialists. Bourke was the centre of many violent political struggles. Whilst the literary aspect of the verse wouldn't win any prizes, it is nevertheless, an interesting verse. For those who have some background in the politics of the period it is revealing in documenting the shifting perspective of sections of the Australian working class from progressive political practice to parliamentary politics. Most will enjoy Lawson's humour and wit.

Our Members - Present and Future

There was joy along the Darling when the labour war began,
An' Labour swept d'for triumph in the year of ninety-one.
Three men we sent to Parliament - three men who promised fair,
We sent 'em out to fight for us, but only one 'jost there'.
There were Roy, Boss an' Richard, all eager for the fray,
And the latter two were going for the "tyrant" straight away.

There was swearing on the Darling ere the dawn of ninety-two,
For the western men were angry at the man who wasn't true.
An' the man, no doubt, was boasting how he did the business brown,
While he fought against oppression in the private barns in town.
The principles of Labour had been left out in the cold,
An' Labour riled the shearer when they thought how they'd been sold.

Now Willie yells for "Labour's Rights" and hour'd for "Libertee;"
He wouldn't know a dump if he saw it — no, not he.
He seems to love the workers all — but causes a curse for none.
An' now he's fighting hoolly in the cause of winner (hun).
For the' he praised the sons of toil an' d-d the sons of Pelf,
He's not a labour sinner; he's a member for himself.

He pretends to be indignant at the actions of "His Nibs,"
An' joins the Opposition in the interests of Bibba.
He works against the country, at the country's expense.
An' tries to dodge the crisis just by sitting on the fence.
The' Cock's law fights for Number One, he thinks it not a crime,
To yell for "Rights o' Labour" — when its near election time.

He worked against McDonald with his influence and tin,
An' the shearer's man was beaten, while a railer saddled in.
Let us call the person Waddle — (he's in saddling to his fall),
An' he'll favour scared an' rifle, if they killed the people all.
He'll uphold the constitution till he pung his dying breath,
An' he'd yell for "Law-and-Order," if the people starved to death.
The only thing he's working for is covered by his hat, 
An' Davis had to stand aside for such a man as that! 
Oh its 'claim the Laws protection' when greedy dogs are done, 
An' its whose for 'Law an' Order' when you fight for 'Rudder One'.

An' Boss was down on Green an' Wong, a friend of toll was Boss, 
But wasn't that which sent him where he spread his bluey now. 
Be pulled for justice in the bush, an' robbed the poor in town. 
But let him rest - its rather need to kick a man that's done. 
If others went where they done, we'd play a lively tune. 
We'd have a new election on the darling pretty soon.

But plucky Baxy Langwell - he did his very best 
To save the tawny colours that he carried from the west, 
For when the Labour Party fell, an' overseers wangle about, 
He strove to save the honour of the men who sent him out.

An' if his speech is rather 'true' - his meaning somewhat rough, 
We know his heart is big and true an' made of sterling stuff. 
But he struggled single handed, an' he fought aga the fate, 
He was handicapped an' humbugged for the want of better mates.

There's 'Watty of the Future' threshing up his hop, 
He's another friend of labour when the labour dog's as top, 
And if western men remember how he served 'em in the past 
He'll be 'Watty of the Future' - of the future till the last.

But he be fishing now for labour, but the fishman ought to know 
How he baited hooks for Willie, not so very long ago. 
Better Jack of the 'Great Western'; he at least is straight and true, 
An' he always does for labour what he thinks is best to do.

Relic of men that's waited at election times out here, 
So, while cheering honest fellows, let us give a whoop for Jack.

Then it's whoop for Baxy Langwell, whose a straight and honest man, 
As a hodman an' a shearer from the roughs of labour's van. 
They know him down the Murray, an' away up in the north. 
As one who'd free his country from the rule of George the Fourth, 
As when the next election comes, well send him back again, 
And take good care his mates shall be the proper kind of men.
Better men then Dick an' Waddy are a-camping in the game, 
As we'll say find a couple when the next election comes; 
That's 'William Walter Davis,' and there's half-a-dozen more; 
There's the open-hearted owner of the station with the bore; 
There's Millet of 'The Western' an' plenty honest men, 
An' two must go with Baxy when we send him back again.

Let 'em stand and fight together spite of influence and 'tin'; 
Let 'em come straight out for honour, and send the best men in.

REFERENCES
1. Mitchell Library (ML) MSS. A1 29