

Lawson — Lost and Found

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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 1895 and published in such magazines and newspapers as The Bulletin, The Boomerang, and The Worker, (in both Sydney and Brisbane). Whilst 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, not the least 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 criticisms generally concentrate on Lawson's later work. The constant failure to identify and analyse 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 'cringing', or the fatal disease of 'declining ideas', as explanations of why Lawson's work somehow declined. Such explanations stumble over the symptoms without recognising the disease.

Looking through some of Lawson's letters I came across one which made me rather curious. In a letter dated September 27, 1892, 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 poem. The chaps have seen the proof and are delighted. Will make about £1.1s. 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, Roderick's note:

M.L. MSSS. 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 28th September, 1892. I wrote to the Librarian, asking for a copy of *all* verse appearing in the *Western Herald* on September 28th, 1892.

Within a few days I received a reply. On September 28th only one verse appeared and it was entitled *Our Members - Present and Future*. A first reading of the photostat provided by the library was enough to convince me that it was Lawson, even though it was published under the non-de-plume 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,

and George Cowdery from the University of New England library saved me much time.

Roughly outlined, the 'proof' that "Tally" was in fact Lawson, and that Lawson wrote *Our Members - Present and Future*, is as follows. Lawson was in Bourke at the time the verse was published. This point can be verified from letters Lawson wrote, and from recollections of friends and people he mixed with. It is well documented by the *Bourke & District Historical Society* members, and others, that Lawson knew and was friendly with members and officials of the Australian Shearers' Union, the General Labourers' Union, and the Carriers' Union. That he was a strong supporter of unionists and unions is also well supported in his verse, prose, and other writings. The details in Lawson's letter to his aunt, Emma Brooks, match both the details of the verse and verifiable historical facts concerning Bourke and those who lived and worked there. Following the passages quoted above, Lawson gave some specific details of the content of the verse:

His [the editor's] brother is a very rich and very good-natured squatter near here. I gave him a show as a probable member of Parliament. Also the landlord where I'm staying. The labour men say that nothing hits like rhyme.

The 'showings' appear on lines 68 and 55 to 58 respectively. Jack of the "Great Western" was John Lennon who was licensee of the Great Western Hotel in Bourke from 1889 until 1892. Millen of the Western (line 69) was Edward Davis Millen who, along with Bill Chapman, published the *Western Herald*. Lines 49 to 54 refer to "Watty of the Future". Watty was in fact Watty Braithwaite, the licensee of the Carriers' Arms in Mitchell Street, Bourke, in 1892. The Carriers' Arms was much frequented by unionists in Bourke, and Lawson used it as his model for the "Shearers' Arms" in his later writing. Lawson also wrote about Watty in his verse "When the Army Prays for Watty" and elsewhere. Finally, particular phrases and words that are used in *Our Members - Present and Future* also appear in other works written by Lawson at the same time. A few examples should suffice. On line 17, Lawson, when talking about Labour, refers to workers and unionists as the "sons of toil", a term he had used in the same context earlier that year in a verse entitled "Modern Parasites".⁴ The term "Pelf" was also used in 1892 in a verse entitled "When your Pants begin to Go".⁵

"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 organising 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 begun,
An' Labour whoop'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 "got there".
There were Huey, Howe an' Nich'las, 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 bushmen brown,
While he fought against oppression in the private bars in town.
The principles of Labour had been left out in the cold,
An' it rather riled the shearers when they thought how they'd been sold.

Now Willis yell'd for "Labour's Rights" and howl'd for "Libertee";
He wouldn't know a dummy if he saw it — no, not he,
He seem'd to love the workers all - but cares a curse for none.
An' now he's fighting boldly in the cause of NUMBER ONE;
For tho' he praised the sons of toil an' d-d the sons of Pelf,
He's not a Labour member; he is member for himself.

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

He worked against McDonnell with his influence and tin,
An' the shearer's man was beaten, while a railer waddled in.
Let us call the person Waddle - (he is waddling to his fall),
An' he'll favour sword an' rifle, if they killed the people all.
He'll uphold the constitution till he pumps his dying breath,
An' he'd yell for "Law-an'-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 deeds are done,
 An' its whoop for "Law-an'-Order" when you fight for Number One)

An' Howe was down on Greed an' Wrong, a friend of toil was Howe,
 But twasn't that which sent him where he spreads his bluey now.
 He yelled for justice in the bush, an' robbed the poor in town,
 But let him rest - its rather mean to kick a man that's down.
 If others went where they deserve, we'd play a lively tune;
 We'd have a new election on the Darling pretty soon.

But plucky Huey Langwell - he did his very best
 To save the tatter'd colours that he carried from the west,
 For when the Labour Party fell, an' comrades turn'd about,
 He strove to save the honour of the men who sent him out.
 An' if his speech is rather "free" - 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 agin the fates,
 He was handicapped an' humbugged for the want of better mates.

There's "Watty of the Future" throwing us his sop,
 He's another friend of labour when the labour dog's on 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 is fishing now for labour, but the fishes ought to know
 How he baited hooks for Willis, 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.
 He's the sort of man that's wanted at election times out back;
 So, while cheering honest fellows, let us give a whoop for Jack.

Then it's whoop for Huey Langwell, whose a straight and honest man,
 An' a bushman an' a shearer from the ranks o' 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,
 An' when the next election comes we'll send him back agen,
 And take good care his mates shall be the proper kind of men;
 Better men than "Nick" and "Waddie" are a-camping in the gums,
 An' we'll easy find a couple when the next election comes;
 Ther'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 Millen of "The Western" an' plenty honest men,
 An' two must go with Hughey when we send him back agen.
 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
2. Roderick, Colin, (ed.) *Henry Lawson Collected Verse. Vol. 1. 1885-1900.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1967
3. Roderick, Colin, (ed.) *Henry Lawson Letters 1890-1922.* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970
4. Roderick, Colin, (ed.) *Henry Lawson Collected Verse. Vol. 1. 1885-1900.* p.193, line 80
5. *Ibid*, p.229, line 19.