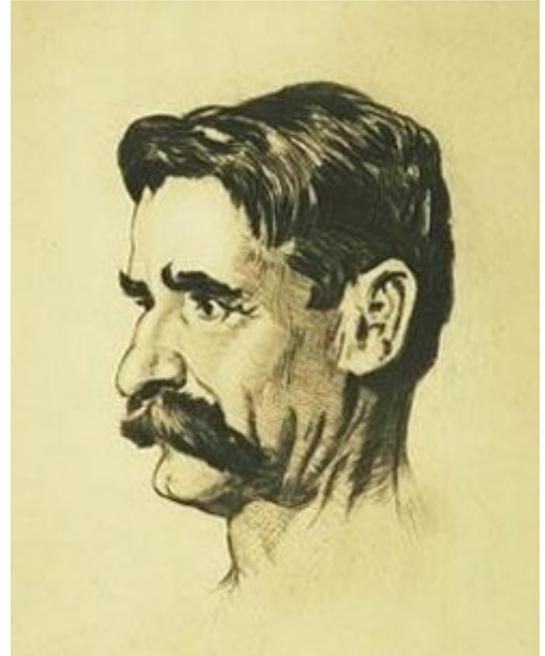


Australian Dictionary of Biography

Lawson, Henry (1867–1922)

by **Brian Matthews**

Henry Lawson (1867-1922), short story writer and balladist, was born on 17 June 1867 at Grenfell, New South Wales, eldest of four surviving children of Niels Hertzberg (Peter) Larsen, Norwegian-born miner, and his wife **Louisa**, née Albury. Larsen went to sea at 21 and, after many voyages, arrived in Melbourne in 1855 where he jumped ship and joined the gold rush. He and Louisa were married in 1866 and Henry (the surname changed when the parents registered the birth) was born about a year later, by which time the marriage was already showing some signs of stress. The family moved often as Peter followed the gold but, in August 1873 with the birth of their third child imminent, they finally settled back at Pipeclay where they had started from. Peter took up a selection which Louisa managed; she also ran a post office in his name while he worked as a building contractor around Mudgee.



Henry Lawson (1867-1922), by Lionel Lindsay

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Existence for the Lawsons, however, remained precarious. The selection even at its best was only marginally productive. With Peter often absent, Louisa was lonely and vulnerable: responsibility began to fall on Henry's young and rather frail shoulders and intensified in him a tendency to reclusiveness and introversion and a personal conviction that he was somehow different from others in a way that cut him off from them. There were happy times: Louisa was imaginative and a brilliant raconteuse and Peter was an accomplished musician. But failing communication between husband and wife, Peter's increasingly frequent absences and the exacerbating effect of continual hardship seemed to outweigh such lighter moments. The young Lawson was often alone, often worried about the problems of the selection, and much disturbed by the apparent estrangement of his parents, a situation about which he was more knowledgeable than the younger children and which caused him keener suffering. Outside the family, he was one of those children who seem inevitably to become the butt for juvenile ridicule and cruelty. He had little opportunity for boyhood friendship and little talent for it when rare opportunities arose. He several times expressed to his father a reluctance to grow older even as worry, fears and oppression were denying him most of the joys of childhood.

Lawson was 8 before Louisa's vigorous agitation led to a school being established in the district, and he was 9 before he actually entered the slab-and-bark Eurunderee Public School as a pupil in the care of the new teacher John Tierney. In the same year, 1876, after a night of sickness and earache, he awoke one morning slightly deaf. For the next five years he suffered hearing deficiency. When he was 14 the condition

deteriorated radically and he was left with a major and incurable hearing loss. For Lawson, already psychologically isolated, the deeper silence of partial deafness was a crushing blow.

When his much-interrupted schooling (three years all told) ended in 1880, Lawson worked with his father on local contract building jobs and then further afield in the Blue Mountains. In 1883, however, he joined his mother in Sydney at her request. Louisa had abandoned the selection and was living at Phillip Street with Henry's sister Gertrude and his brother Peter. He became apprenticed to Hudson Bros Ltd as a coachpainter and undertook night-class study towards matriculation. Yet, as the story ('Arvie Aspinall's Alarm Clock') which he based on that time of his life suggests, he was no happier in Sydney than he had been on the selection. His daily routine exhausted him, his workmates persecuted him and he failed the examinations. Over the next few years he tried or applied for various jobs with little success. Oppressed anew by his deafness, he went to Melbourne in 1887 in order to be treated at the Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital. The visit, happy in other ways, produced no cure for his affliction and thereafter Lawson seems to have resigned himself to living in the muffled and frustrating world of the deaf.

Meanwhile he had begun to write. Contact with his mother's radical friends imbued in him a fiery and ardent republicanism out of which grew his first published poem, 'A Song of the Republic' (*Bulletin*, 1 October 1887). He followed this with 'The Wreck of the Derry Castle' and 'Golden Gully', the latter growing partly out of memories of the diggings of his boyhood. At the same time he had his introduction to journalism, writing pieces for the *Republican*, a truculent little paper run by Louisa and William Keep (its precarious and eccentric existence is celebrated in the poem 'The Cambaroora Star'). By 1890 Lawson had achieved some reputation as a writer of verse, poems such as 'Faces in the Street', 'Andy's Gone With Cattle' and 'The Watch on the Kerb' being some of the more notable of that period.

Early in 1891 Lawson was offered, as he put it, 'the first, the last and the only chance I got in journalism'. The offer came from [Gresley Lukin](#) of the Brisbane *Boomerang* and was eagerly accepted. Lawson became a prolific contributor of prose and rhymes to the *Boomerang* and also to [William Lane's](#) *Worker*. But his luck had not changed: by September the *Boomerang* was in trouble and Lawson's services were dispensed with. Once again he found himself in Sydney dividing his time between odd jobs, writing and occasional carousing with friends, chief among whom at this time was [E. J. Brady](#).

Whether it was a matter of luck or temperament, Lawson seemed unable to attain equilibrium or direction in his writing or his lifestyle. His promising early poems had been followed by a rush of versifying on a wide range of topics, contemporary and reminiscent; and his first published story, 'His Father's Mate' (*Bulletin*, December 1888), though uneven and sentimental, had given glimpses of his extraordinary ability as a writer of short stories. By 1892 a number of sketches together with the magnificent 'The Drover's Wife' had fully borne out the initial promise. Yet Lawson seemed in a rut: failing to concentrate his energies and gifts much beyond what was required for subsistence, spending more and more time in favourite bars around Sydney. Recognizing something of Lawson's inner faltering, [J. F. Archibald](#) suggested he take a trip inland at the *Bulletin's* expense. With £5 and a rail ticket to Bourke, he set out in September 1892 on what was to be one of the most important journeys of his life.

Much of what Lawson saw in the drought-blasted west of New South Wales during succeeding months appalled him. 'You can have no idea of the horrors of the country out here', he wrote to his aunt, 'men tramp and beg and live like dogs'. Nevertheless, the experience at Bourke itself and in surrounding districts through which he carried his swag absolutely overwhelmed him. By the time he returned to civilization, he was armed with memories and experiences—some of them comic but many shattering—that would furnish

his writing for years. 'The Bush Undertaker', 'The Union Buries its Dead' and some of the finest of the Mitchell sketches were among the work he produced soon after his return. *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, the selection of his work produced by Louisa on the *Dawn* press in 1894, brought together some of these stories albeit in unprepossessing form and flawed by misprints. But *While the Billy Boils* (1896) was Lawson's first major short-story collection. It remains one of the great classics of Australian literature.

Though the creative pressure of his outback experience showed almost immediately in his writing, Lawson's life in other respects settled back into the depressingly familiar hole-and-corner existence. After six months he went to New Zealand where he worked eventually as a telegraph linesman, turning his back on journalism and alcohol. He returned to Sydney on 29 July 1894 to take a position on the newly formed *Daily Worker* only to see it wound up three days later. He consoled himself with drink and Bohemian exploits with a circle of friends that now included **J. Le Gay Brereton**. The release in December of *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, did little to lift his spirits or his income.

Within a year, however, Lawson seemed poised to achieve both the recognition and the stability he had been seeking. In 1895 he contracted to publish two books with **Angus & Robertson**; and he met Bertha Marie Louise Bredt (1876-1957), daughter of **Bertha McNamara**. After a brief and, on Lawson's part, characteristically intense and impulsive courtship, they were married on 15 April 1896. That year Angus and Robertson brought out the two books, *In the Days when the World was Wide and other Verses* and *While the Billy Boils*, as arranged; both were well received.

Following an abortive trip to Western Australia in search of gold, the Lawsons returned to Sydney where Henry, now a writer and public figure of some note, embarked on a colourful round of escapades in which large amounts of alcohol and the company of his Dawn and Dusk Club friends, including **Fred Broomfield**, **Victor Daley** and **Bertram Stevens**, were central ingredients. The Lawsons' move to Mangamaunu in the South Island of New Zealand was arranged by Bertha with the express intention of removing him from this kind of life. They left on 31 March 1897, but the venture was not a success, creatively or otherwise. Lawson's initial enthusiasm for the Maoris whom he taught at the lonely, primitive settlement soon waned. As well, there is evidence in some of his verse of that time ('Written Afterwards', 'The Jolly Dead March') that he was realizing, for perhaps the first time since their romantically rushed courtship and marriage and subsequent boisterous, crowded life in Western Australia and Sydney, both the responsibilities and the ties of his situation. Lawson's growing restiveness was deepened by promising letters from English publishers. Bertha's pregnancy strengthened his resolve and they left Mangamaunu in November 1897, returning to Sydney in March after Bertha's confinement. Lawson spent the enforced wait in Wellington writing a play ('Pinter's Son Jim') commissioned by **Bland Holt**; it turned out to be too unwieldy to stage.

Lawson went back to old friends and old ways in Sydney. He had returned with one overriding aim: to get to London, where he felt certain there would be more opportunity for him to live by his pen. He expressed a mounting sense of frustration and bitterness by drinking heavily—he entered a home for inebriates in November 1898—and by writing a personal statement to the *Bulletin*. This appeared in the January 1899 issue under the title 'Pursuing Literature in Australia'. Abstemious and industrious throughout the ensuing year, Lawson worked on books contracted earlier with Angus & Robertson—*On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails* (stories) and *Verses Popular and Humorous*. But he would probably not have realized his goal of 'seeking London' had it not been for the generous help of **David Scott Mitchell**, the governor **Earl Beauchamp** and George Robertson. He set off on 20 April 1900 for England. With him went his wife, his son Joseph and his daughter of just over two months, Bertha.

Lawson himself in later years provided fuel for the idea that his English interlude, so eagerly anticipated, was in fact a catastrophe: 'Days in London like a nightmare'; 'That wild run to London/That wrecked and ruined me'. But he had some successes in London, the opportunity was certainly there for him to establish himself upon the literary scene and he may have been in some ways simply unlucky. On arrival he retained the services of J. B. Pinker, one of the best literary agents in England, and was soon receiving enthusiastic encouragement from critic and publisher's reader Edward Garnett and William Blackwood, editor of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. The four Joe Wilson stories—generally regarded by critics as the peak of his achievement—were written in London, and Blackwood published two new Lawson collections in two years: *Joe Wilson and his Mates* (1901) and *Children of the Bush* (1902). But the strain of family life in unfamiliar surrounds and an unkind climate, his wife's serious illness (she spent three months from May 1901 in Bethlem Royal Hospital as a mental patient) and the consequent return to the soul-destroying task of writing under pressure to pay the bills, all sapped Lawson's early resilience and affected his health, the quality of his work and the nature of his literary aspirations and plans. By April 1902 he was arranging for Bertha to return home with the children. He followed soon after and they were all back in Sydney before the end of July.

From that time Lawson's personal and creative life entered upon a ghastly decline. A reconciliation with Bertha soon after their return was short lived. In December 1902 he attempted suicide. In April next year Bertha sought and obtained a decree for judicial separation. He wrote a great deal despite his often squalid circumstances but his work alternated between desperate revivals of old themes and inspirations and equally desperate and unsuccessful attempts to break new ground. Maudlin sentimentality and melodrama, often incipient even in some earlier work, invaded both his prose and poetry. Among later books were *The Skyline Riders and other Verses* (1910); *My Army, o my Army! and other Songs* (1915); and *Triangles of Life and other stories* (1913). He was frequently gaoled for failure to pay maintenance for his children and, after 1907, was several times in a mental hospital. Though cared for by the loyal Mrs Byers, he became a frail, haunted and pathetic figure well known on the streets of Sydney; in his writing, images of ghostliness proliferated and increasingly a sense of insubstantiality blurred action and characters. Loyal friends arranged spells at Mallacoota, Victoria, (with Brady) in 1910 and at Leeton in 1916. But his state of mind, physical condition and alcoholism continued to worsen. The Commonwealth Literary Fund granted him £1 a week pension from May 1920. He died of cerebral haemorrhage at Abbotsford on 2 September 1922.

Lawson was something of a legendary figure in his lifetime. Not surprisingly, as dignitaries and others gathered for his state funeral on 4 September, that legend was already beginning to flourish in various exotic ways. The result was that some of his achievements were inflated—he became known, for example, as a great poet—and others obscured. Lawson's reputation must rest on his stories and on a relatively small group of them: *While the Billy Boils*, the Joe Wilson quartet of linked, longer stories and certain others lying outside these (among them, 'The Loaded Dog', 'Telling Mrs Baker' and 'The Geological Spieler'). In these he shows himself not only a master of short fiction but also a writer of peculiarly modern tendency. The prose is spare, cut to the bone, the plot is either slight or non-existent. Skilfully modulated reticence makes even the barest and shortest sketches seem excitingly full of possibility, alive with options and potential insights. A stunning example is 'On the Edge of a Plain' but almost any Mitchell sketch from *While the Billy Boils* exemplifies these qualities. Though not a symbolist writer, Lawson had the capacity to endow accurately observed documentary detail with a significance beyond its physical reality: the drover's wife burning the snake; the black goanna dying 'in violent convulsions on the ground' ('The Bush Undertaker'); the 'hard dry Darling River clods' clattering on to the coffin of the unknown drover ('The

Union Buries its Dead') are seemingly artless yet powerful Lawsonian moments which, in context, transform simple surface realism into intimations about the mysteries, the desperations and the tragedies of ordinary and anonymous lives.

Lawson failed fully to assimilate one of the most vital inspirations of his writing life—his experience in the western outback. It was the source of most of his best work, but he returned to it again and again, coming close to Hemingway-like self-parody as he sought to gain creative renewal from a seam already thoroughly mined. Only the Joe Wilson series allowed him temporary freedom from this enslavement, because these four connected stories are about the rare joys, awkward intimacies and frequent sorrows of a marriage that is slowly, imperceptibly, deteriorating. As a subject it clearly owed much to those lonely months at Mangamaunu and it did not rejuvenate Lawson's art because he could not pursue the theme without coming into unacceptably close engagement with the realities of his own marriage. In any case, Lawson's withholding, austere prose was ill suited to analytic probing, which is why *Joe Wilson*, fine piece of work though it is, seems constantly on the point of disintegration.

The decline of his creative ability, as it were before his very eyes, in the years from about 1902 onwards (though the malaise is traceable earlier than that in, for example, *On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails*) was one of the great tragedies of Lawson's troubled life. Too much evidence exists to show with what deep and continued seriousness he aspired to be a memorable writer for his artistic decline to be regarded in any less important light. To this disaster were added personal crosses—deafness, a marital failure that deeply grieved him—which even a stronger temperament would have found hard to withstand. That he managed to dredge out of disadvantage, adversity and often appalling hardship so many magnificent stories is testimony to a toughness and determination that he is perhaps not often enough given credit for.

His statue by [George Lambert](#) is in the Domain, Sydney; his portrait by [Longstaff](#) is in the Art Gallery of New South Wales and another by [Norman Carter](#) is at Parliament House, Canberra.

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Related Entries in NCB Sites

- [Franklin, Stella Maria Sarah Miles](#) (friend)  

- [Longstaff, John Campbell](#) (artist)  
- [Stone, Walter William](#) (related entry) 

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