

Australian Bush Life in Henry Lawson's Select Short Stories – A Study

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Henry Lawson's short stories are archetypal representation of the Australian life in the Bush and its culture. The life of the Bush is so life like in his portrayal that it has become mythical through his representation. By Australian Bush it means wide range of landscapes covered across thousands of kilometers with very scanty vegetation except for the long grass and the cacti. Romanticizing the bush was a big step forward for Australians in their steps towards self-identity. The bush has mysteriously been related to the good and the ominous by the people of Australia. It has been seen as a source of nourishment and survival. David McKee Wright named Lawson 'the first articulate voice of the real Australian'.

Lawson's tales bore the pictures of the daily Australian Bush with sturdy men and women fighting for survival with their family, cattle, expectations and failures. Lawson's stories are historically important because it was the time when the Federation was formed and the six self-governing colonies of the British Empire decided to come together, establishing the Australian Nation on first January, 1901. Debates about the nature and future of Australian society were the main topics of discussion in all sections of the society, and Australian writing and painting got a chance to flourish as never before. But on the other hand, economic depression and drought put people in severe crisis and many prosperous people had given way to economic depression in the end of nineteenth century. Many people who had been well-off suddenly became poor, and those in rural or outback regions had to lead a poverty stricken life with very few certainties or comforts.

The short stories were written by Henry Lawson during the 1890s, with *Joe Wilson's Courtship* written in 1900. By this time, Australia had been settled for over one hundred years. This makes Henry Lawson one of the first Australian born writers with compositions influenced by the unique Australian landscape and emerging culture. For this reason, Lawson contributed significantly to the creation of a recognizable Australian identity. By the late 1800s, most Australians lived in towns and cities, however it was the Australian bush that captured their imagination. This, perhaps, was due to the harsh and rugged bush environment, which was very much in contrast to the mild rose gardens and green pastoral areas of the English landscape; a landscape firmly fixed in the minds of a predominantly British population.

Lawson's stories reflect many aspects of his own times, of the places and people he knew from his personal experiences. His accounts of the bush and outback life in colonial Australia are rich sources of images and ideas about Australia's national identity. Lawson's distinctive, iconic characters have become part of the national Australian mythology. Through his short stories, Henry Lawson presents visual images, which convey the reality of life in the Australian bush, as he perceived it. Lawson's sympathies lie not with the aristocratic squatter but with the struggling selector and the indefatigable drover. He feels the pangs of the hard-hit perils of life as he was himself very much a part of it. His characters are of limited means but they never shirk away from hard, physical

work and never fail to help a friend. They also have their families, the wife and mother who raises the children, runs the family farm and survives floods, droughts, disease, animal attacks, loneliness and the inevitable drunk or desperate husbands or the elderly male member of the house.

Lawson's characters have a dry but indomitable sense of humor. They are practical and realistic, compassionate but with little tolerance for the sentimental or romantic. "The complex character of Henry Lawson and the rich complexity of his stories appear to open unlimited options for interpreting the man and his work. He has become a cultural myth, a legend. And like all myths, the myth of Henry Lawson helps us to understand something about Australian culture while it also imposes that meaning upon us. It is not Henry Lawson himself, but the stories about 'Lawson' that have accumulated and been circulated through culture over time, which make him a legend. Layers of myths and interpretations have been built up around the writer and his works. The uses of Lawson, the social and political contexts into which he is put, and the interpretations produced through social practice, but received as truth—these have made Lawson a cultural object."² This paper by deciphering *The Drover's Wife*, *The Babies of the Woods*, and *Water them Geraniums* by Henry Lawson, tries to understand the Australian life of the bush which is primarily characterized by the elements of rusticity, hard working people, lonely women, drovering, jumping kangaroos and cattle herds, nostalgia, sentiments of the Australians and the aborigines. It also tries to intervene deep in the stories of Lawson thereby scrutinizing the issues addressed by him in his unique style of presentation.

Most part of Lawson's stories, as mentioned earlier, tells about the Bush and the people living in it. David Mac Key Wright in Lawson's biography quotes:

"Lawson has lived the life that he sings, and seen the places of which he writes; there is not one word in all his work which is not instantly recognised by his readers as honest Australian. The drover, the stockman, the shearer, the rider on the skyline, the girl waiting at the sliprails, the big bush funeral, the coach with flashing lamps passing at night along the ranges, the man to whom home is a bitter memory and his future a long despair; the troops marching to the beat of the drum, the coasting vessel struggling through blinding gales, the great grey plain, the wilderness of the Never Never—in long procession the pictures pass, and every picture is a true one because Henry Lawson has been there to see with his eyes and heart."

All the three stories taken up for discussion are important to understand the life in the Bush. Lawson's writings, establishes his credentials as the authentic voice of Australia, which is the voice of the Bush. It also registers the familiar themes of the Bush adventurer, caught between hope and despair, measuring his grit against a threatening landscape, where women wait for their husband, sons to come back and also wait for something exciting in life that can break away the monotony of existence. The general appearance of the bush and the adeptness of a bushman are beautifully described by Lawson in *Water them Geraniums*. The narrator, Joe Wilson reports in an analyzing tone:

"There was no horizon, nothing but the rough ashen trunks of the gnarled and stunted trees in all directions, little or no undergrowth, and the ground, save for the coarse, brownish tufts of dead grass, as bare as the road, for it was a dry season: there had been no rain for months, and I

wondered what I should do with the cattle if there wasn't more grass on the creek... In this sort of country a stranger might travel for miles without seeming to have moved, for all the difference there is in the scenery. The new tracks were 'blazed'--that is, slices of bark cut off from both sides of trees, within sight of each other, in a line, to mark the track until the horses and wheel-marks made it plain. A smart Bushman, with a sharp tomahawk, can blaze a track as he rides. But a Bushman a little used to the country soon picks out differences amongst the trees, half unconsciously as it were, and so finds his way about.(1)"¹

Water them Geraniums is set in the backdrop of the scanty drought of 1890s that made life in the Bush very difficult. We find the monotony of the life in the bush very clear from the geographical ambience and the lives of its settlers. In every story, we have Lawson describing 'droving' as a staple occupation of the settlers and the hardships in their lives. He describes how hard their lives are, roaming around in different parts of Australia without proper, food, water or shelter, dry and dusty all over and the monotony of such existence. *Babies in the Bush* vividly describes the experience of the drovers thus:

"The long, hot, dusty miles dragged by across the blazing plains--big clearings rather--and through the sweltering hot scrubs, and we reached Bathurst at last; and then the hot dusty days and weeks and months that we'd left behind us to the Great North-West seemed as nothing,--as I suppose life will seem when we come to the end of it." (2)

The above extract clearly brings out the life's journey of a drover who once had come out of his house with different dreams and expectations, knowing the world in one way and after the long years and months of droving in the dust, his perception of world and life changes completely.

It is very interesting that the characters in these stories gain much of their dignity, and their enduring presence in Australian culture, from their willingness to treat their fellow men and women as their equals. There is an interesting combination in Lawson where there are indefinite proportions of the masculine-feminine traits in the characters only that they are overpowered by each trait depending on their circumstances. The women as a consequence of their eternal waiting have to perform several unconventional roles in the family very typical to the Bush. They pose as a father surrogate to their children; act as the man of the house conducting all difficult chores of protecting the house from leaks in the incessant rain, teaching the children, cooking, washing, maintaining the house, doing all outdoor work, and of course protecting themselves from any stranger or drunken aborigine. The Drover's wife is a sturdy lady with masculine traits; it is rather better to put that the hardships of life have made her masculine and strong. The drover's wife fights many battles without her husband, and each struggle makes her stronger. She thinks about some of the difficulties she has faced in her life while her husband is away. She keeps a watch for the snake the whole night that had slithered under the house through the night protecting her babies. While guarding her children she remembers when one of her children died and "she rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child". She recalls the fire that almost destroyed her home and how she took on the role of

¹ The page numbers of the excerpts are according to the pages of the print out copies taken from the electronic resources: Website: <http://www.readbookonline.net/stories/Lawson/155/> and not equivalent to the Henry Lawson's Short Stories original copy.

her husband, wearing his trousers while she snuffed out the flames with a bough. "She also fought the pleuro-pneumonia--dosed and bled the few remaining cattle, and wept again when her two best cows died. Again, she fought a mad bullock that besieged the house for a day. She made bullets and fired at him through cracks in the slabs with an old shot-gun. He was dead in the morning. She skinned him and got seventeen-and-sixpence for the hide." She has sacrificed her femininity because she says: "her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the 'womanly' or sentimental side of nature".

She has few pleasures to think of as she sits here alone by the fire, on guard against a snake. All days are much the same to her; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. There is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet. You might walk for twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind, unless you are a bushman. This is because of the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees--that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ship can sail--and farther." (5)

She thinks about her sister who also has a similar life like her, whose husband got ruined in the drought and he too had to go droving. The only thing she had to feed her womanhood was the Young Ladies' Journal. It is a reminder of the dreams she had as a girl that never came to be true.

This is pitifully true for the women in the Bush that the persistent monotony of their lives make them nearly mad or wholly out of their senses. Lawson's women are no cowards but they are sentimental and individual in their characteristics. They feel a certain degree of pride and self-pity at the same time handling the family on their own through all oddities. The husband's home coming is not a great event to them. It is no break from their daily routine. The Drover's wife is "glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children." Whenever the husbands returned, it was echoed more problems for future as this would bring news for a child to be born in the family. The narrator in *Water Them Geraniums* relates the life of Mrs. Spicer which is marked by all sort of adversities yet she had a dozen of kids.

"I don't know how many children she had. I never got a chance to count them, for they were nearly all small, and shy as piccaninnies, and used to run and hide when anybody came. They were mostly nearly as black as piccaninnies too. She must have averaged a baby a-year for years--and God only knows how she got over her confinements!"(11)

Another important trait, apart from the sturdy stoutness, that Lawson highlights in his women characters is an element of madness that makes their lives unbearable and full of miseries. Except for the Drover's wife, the other women characters are nearly mad or wholly psychic patients who lead their lives in monotony, lost in their own worlds. The husbands, on the other hand, are sympathetic, understanding and soft towards their wives. They seem to understand the reason that has turned them mad. Long, monotonous, unexciting, uncared existence has made them psycho-somatic. They waited for

company, a new face to talk to and a new event to happen in their lives. They loved guests in their house and treated them with utmost comfort and offered sumptuous meals as per one's capacity not because it was a taboo but to entertain themselves for the little change in their lives. In *Babies in the Bush*, Mrs. Head, who has turned mad after losing her children and being alone for months after that, is very keen on receiving guests in her house and being a good hostess. Mrs. Spicer and Mrs. Wilson both enjoy the company of each other but not for the reason that they like each other as their best friends but that they are company to each other and this can keep away monotony for some time.

It is unique of Lawson to use the male as the narrator narrating their lives and of the women but entirely from a male perspective. Feminists can stamp him as a patriarch as the men characters talk about the women from their own pejoratives and the women sometimes seem dominated. Lawson often wrote in a style known as the 'sketch'. A sketch is a short story with very little plot. As the name suggests, the focus is on 'sketching'; similar to an artist, the writer creates impressions of people and places – a picture in words. This style is more serious in nature and is often an attempt to show the tragedy in people's lives for its own sake. For this reason, the 'sketch' lends itself to powerful observations concerning the human condition. In fact, the responder becomes a voyeur watching as the sketch unfolds and reveals itself. Lawson admits to combining two distinct writing styles – the sketch and the short story. Lawson himself said "I thought the short story was a lazy man's game, second to 'free' verse, compared with the sketch. The sketch, to be really good, must be good in every line. But the sketch-story is best of all."⁴This blending of styles explains the tightly structured nature of his short stories and his tendency to focus on characterization and setting over plot in creating a distinctively visual impression of life in the Australian bush. In doing so, Lawson presents a distinctively visual impression of the comedic larrikinism that, whilst belonging to a bygone era, still characterizes so much of Australian national identity.

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All quotes from the stories are taken from Website:
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