

**Paul Eggert, *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson's While the Billy Boils*
Sydney UP, The Pennsylvania UP, 2013 (\$40 pb)**

**Paul Eggert, ed. *Henry Lawson: While the Billy Boils: the Original Newspaper Versions*. Explanatory Notes by Elizabeth Webby
Sydney UP, 2013 (\$30 pb)**

I'm delighted to be saying a few words to mark the launch of these two important volumes from Sydney University Press

The original newspaper versions of the *While the Billy Boils* stories are edited by Paul Eggert, with useful explanatory notes from Elizabeth Webby. The companion study, by Paul Eggert, is a biography of Lawson's book, *While the Billy Boils*, the story of the book's life as an Angus & Robertson icon, but also following its various afterlives as an Australian literary classic, down to the present. (My copies are both hardbacks, but they're also available in paperback.) Paul's *Biography of a Book*, is also published simultaneously with The Pennsylvania UP. Correct me if I'm wrong, but this is the first biography of a book that we've had in Australian literary studies.

I'm pleased to see that this project of editorial and critical mateship – between Paul and Liz – is of a suitably bi-gendered nature, not the old androcentric kind. 'Don't go into the bush without a mate,' said Lawson. Well now we have these two expert guides to a newly formatted Lawson-land, a grand place, but still, nevertheless, the 'nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and much that is different from things in other lands'.

These two volumes constitute a landmark re-presentation and re-assessment of Lawson's first major collection, the 52 sketches and stories that make up *While the Billy Boils*, published initially in Australia in August 1896 and in England the year after. (Lawson was in Perth, East Perth actually, with Bertha, when the book was published in Sydney.) These new versions of Lawson began as part of the upsurge in new-wave Australian editing and bibliographical work in the mid-1990s, that both

Paul and Elizabeth, of course, were at the forefront of. While they are exemplars of best, contemporary editorial and critical practice they also adapt innovative possibilities of current print culture: the individual Lawson stories will be available, I gather, as self-contained pdfs, each bundled with the Introduction and Note on the Texts, for about \$2. (That's cheaper than an Elliot Perlman novel.)

The edited collection of stories is an illuminating exercise in rereading: Paul and Elizabeth have returned to the texts of 'the original newspaper versions and plac[ed] them in the chronological order of their first [serial] publication, [thus] the edition strips away the textual accretions and sequencing of the 1896 (and later) collections rather than treating them as the inevitable climax of a literary evolution' (xiii). There are multiple and fascinating stories behind this seemingly inoffensive scholarly action: about the relation between the 28-year old Lawson and the ambitious publisher George Robertson (busy starting up Angus & Robertson as a competitor in style and substance to the English and Scottish publishers he'd been formed by), about Lawson's more intimate relation with the professional literary man, Arthur Jose, who was employed by Robertson to edit Lawson's clippings with him. Part of this story is about Jose's regularising, for an English readership, of what had been Lawson's experimental notation of Australian speech in the democratic forums of radical newspapers and popular literary journals. And there is the even more intimate story of the newly married Bertha Bredt acting as Lawson's amanuensis for the two *Billy Boils* stories 'For Auld Lang Syne' and 'The Geological Speiler,' holographs of which survive, while none of Lawson's own do.

Altogether these editorial manoeuvres and revisions only added to my own rereadings of the stories and sketches – known by most of us from childhood and school days I would guess – with their weird pathos, hauntingly voiced narrators and unforgettable characters. This presentation of the stories is like having your windscreen cleaned, although it has to be said, one of the things that appears more sharply, reading both these volumes, is the unbearably sad life of Henry Lawson himself. The *Billy Boils* stories were first published in Australian and New Zealand

papers and magazines (*Bulletin, Worker, Boomerang, New Zealand Mail*, etc) but the Angus & Robertson collection, along with the later *Joe Wilson* collections, of course, have always been subject to critical, publishing industry and cultural desires for a Lawson novel, or proto-novel. For all sorts of complex reasons.

Paul's biography of *While the Billy Boils* is much more than the title might suggest: it includes relevant narratives of Lawson's early life and career as a writer, as well as the legendary episodes: the fiery young republican; his mother Louisa's publishing his first pamphlet of writing; the 1893 walk from Bourke to Hungerford; the two years in England. But there are also newer insights, for me at least, into Lawson's print-soaked life, into the specifics of Jose's deployment of Kipling as a model – even of Hemingway's attraction to Lawson's stories evidenced in his posthumous *Islands in the Stream* (258). Interestingly, Hemingway's novel began as three linked, longish tales.

Also part of this comprehensive biography are accounts of the literary marketplace of the last decades of the 19th-century in Australia and England, of the origins of Angus & Robertson as a commercial venture, of the manuscript record of the pre-publication and copy-editing history of the book, of the history of the book's illustrations and illustrators, the reception history of the collection, and its publication history up till the present. And an important final chapter on 'Australian literary criticism and scholarly editing from the 1980s: *While the Billy Boils* as cross-section.' Whatever else it does this book-biography should, once and for all, dispose of those persistent assumptions about Lawson's collection as 'a self-contained literary classic or, alternatively, as the discursive expression of a nationalist mindset of the 1890s' (4). Actually this study also opens up new understandings of 'market conditions [and] period mentalities (29), and perhaps most significantly of the way in which Lawson's original experiments with narrative modes were given a 'veneer of book decorum when collected' (100). Now there is even the potential, I guess, of reading the stories psychogeographically, as proto-*dérives*, with the re-sequencing

by first serial publication, which allows us to see the way they follow Lawson's wanderings (113). There's a possible Ph.D topic!

The material conditions and modes of publishing that Lawson lived within constrained his generic options (just as they shaped his creative adaptation of them): this is one of Paul's biggest gripes with Colin Roderick (and I think he's right): he (Roderick that is) blamed Lawson for his 'creative inability to imagine, and his lack of the self-discipline required to organise, material on the extended scale required by a novel. There is, however, a straightforward print-historical reason why Lawson's storytellers and characters do not become more coherently imagined from one story to the next. It is simply that Lawson sold and was paid for the stories individually. They had to be able to stand alone. He could offer stories to a particular proprietor if he had more than one in hand; and he might or might not be successful in selling them. But he had no control over when they would appear or in whose literary or other company they would ultimately sit, in the jumble of miscellaneous copy that characterised the multiple columns of tiny type of most 1890s newspapers' (59). [Jules François] Archibald at the *Bulletin* gave Lawson £5 to travel to Bourke and send back copy; pretty mean compared with Zola's months of research into the Valenciennes coal mines for *Germinal*.

Much of the scholarly and historical detail in Paul's monograph is motivated by the determination to demonstrate that the 'cultural environment of the late colonial period in Australia was more variegated than most of its subsequent interpreters were prepared to grant' (274). A worthy aim. And hence the critique of each of the critical paradigms that have heretofore defined Lawson and the long 1890s, revealing the 'cultural indexing that long-lived literary works always perform' (292). Vance Palmer, Russel Ward, Marilyn Lake and Graeme Davison, Kay Schaffer, Phillips and Macartney, Wilkes, Murray-Smith and Kiernan, Brian Matthews, H.P. Heseltine (good for 'source' studies), Brian Kiernan, and then ... Colin Roderick.

I can't help drawing your attention to this thread in Paul's story of Lawson criticism, because this is perhaps the audience most likely to appreciate it (if that's the word). In the story collection, when Paul is giving an account of the editorial thinking behind the edition, and giving a sketch of 20th-century paradigms of editorial policy – Greg-Bowers, etc – the judgement on Colin Roderick (the wicked father of Lawson editions in the 20th-century) is pretty damning: 'Roderick gives no indication of having been affected by, or even having known of, this postwar tradition. This is a pity as it would have provided him with reasoned grounds on which to question his own approach, which he evidently saw as inevitable and as his bounden duty to implement' (xxix). Paul's monograph, the biography of Lawson's book, provides more extended Housmanesque entertainment in this vein. It leads up to a kind of scholarly-academic version of the confrontation with Valdemort. I can't tell you what happens except to say the young Harry Lawson is saved. The final chapter, 'Criticism and Scholarly editing since the 1980s' moves towards the section titled 'Roderick: Conclusion'. Here Roderick's textual policy of choosing 'the last authorised version' (341) which has been obscuring Lawson since 1972 is vanquished and the ground for a potentially new criticism of Lawson is cleared. And it is a criticism that recognises the different spheres of books and works, and yet that recognises the necessity of being equally knowledgeable about both, in the present, and about their pasts (347).

A strange sidebar occurs to me here, because at least one of the things Paul's work implies is biographies of other books: it becomes obvious then, that at one of the foundational moments of Australian literature there are two unruly, resistant bodies of writing: Furphy's gigantic single novel, so big originally it had to have two novella-length diversionary tales excised so that it could be published, and two unruly constellations of sketches and tales — *While the Billy Boils* and *Joe Wilson and his Mates* — that couldn't be shaped into coherent novel-length narratives. In Furphy's case, then, too much novel; in Lawson's not enough. This is actually interesting in terms of the global history of the novel and its dissemination through different historical and cultural chronotopes. It suggests a revisionary starting

point: the likelihood that the desire for unitary, temporally aligned (national) literary origins is retrospective only. The reality is the other way round: Furphy and Lawson's narrative modes – partly inherited, partly innovative – are caught up in an evolving social entity, rather than expressive of it.

(I can also envisage using this book as a handbook of print culture history and analysis: saying to Honours and postgraduate students that they might be interested to find out about such things as printer's copy, mark-up hands, foliation, the 'nexus between retail price and page-extent' (128). It is also a case study for exploring the theoretical question of work and text, or the print culture history of literature and books (as opposed to 'sub-literary' writing in non-book forms),

To launch a book, of course, is a manner of speaking: although it's also performative (in a way), a performative use of figurative language. But there is perhaps an objective correlative for this metaphor in the case of these two books: their dust-jackets are exactly the same colours – to my eye at least – as ships of the Royal Australian Navy. I think the colour is called 'Storm Grey' or sometimes 'Ship Sides Grey'. So as I was reading them I couldn't help think of these two volumes as sleek, newly commissioned frigates of Australian scholarship, leaving the scrap-iron flotilla of previous Lawson editions far behind in their wake.

Congratulations to Paul and Elizabeth, and to Sydney UP, for this achievement. Australian literary studies, including book history, criticism and theory, are significantly enriched with these landmark – or should I say, flagship – volumes.

Philip Mead

Wagga, 3 July, 2013