

JIM GRAHAME

Henry Lawson

The following memoir of Henry Lawson was written by his friend, Jim Grahame (Jim Gordon), shortly after Lawson's death in Sydney in September 1922. The version published here is held in the Cyril Goode Papers in State Library Victoria and is one of three memoirs of Lawson by Grahame. The text has been transcribed by John Barnes.

I first met him in the main street of Bourke. I was lonely, and somewhat frightened and home sick, and he was alone pacing the footpath up one side and down the other. I watched him for a while, he seemed different to all the others, busy tradesmen or bush town loafer[s]: and after following the full length of the square I met him as he turned to retrace his steps. I said 'Good day mate' and he looked up suddenly and had in his face the look of one who was embarrassed at being caught day dreaming. After a searching look at me, he replied 'Hello have you been shanghaied too?' and chuckled softly. I guessed that it was my untanned skin, heavy winter clothing, and light laced up boots, that gave him his cue. After I had explained to him that I was looking for a job and that I had little or no money he said [']There are a couple of us camped in a place just across the billabong [] there's room for you if you care to come.['] I did care to go, and that was the friendship that lasted a life time – As we were passing a grocery store I went in and bought some tinned food and half a loaf of bread. I was half afraid that he would have disappeared, but as I came out he was waiting. In front of an old fashioned looking pub he halted for a second, and said casually, 'Do you shicker[?]' And when I replied in the negative, he again chuckled softly and said 'Nor do I.' The house was the smallest to have three rooms that I have ever seen, but it was well built, with stone and open fireplace, firewood seemed to be a problem and as we entered a tall blonde Norse or Swede was stoking the fire with a ~~eows~~ shinbone and dry cow dung.

Opening page (detail) of Jim Grahame's memoir of Henry Lawson, c. late-1922.
Cyril Goode Papers, Manuscripts Collection, PA 291, Box 7

Jan 2nd 1898 John Graham

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Lawson did not introduce me to the blonde, or the other whom I fancy was a Welchman, Evans by name. There were no bunks or furniture of any kind in the place, and billies and a frying pan the only cooking utensils. I learned later, that Lawson owned ~~nothing~~ none of them, but the other two were socialists in every letter of the word, and what they had, Lawson was welcome to share. I soon fell into their ways and it was not more than an hour before they were eating my sardines, and I chewing (for I had good teeth in those days) their cold corn beef, which was as hard as, and shone when cut, like a piece of mahogany – it must have been cooked for a month, good and tasty nevertheless. It will be understood that, I had yet to discover that my new companion was Henry Lawson, in fact when the man Evans mentioned it next morning, I was inclined to doubt him. ‘Lawson’! the man who had written all those splendid verses that I had read in the Bulletin and elsewhere, I could hardly believe it, I had always visualised him in the lap of luxury, enjoying the admiration and plaudits of half the people of Sydney. (Little did I know my own country in those days, but I have had my lesson since then, many of them in fact.) The following morning I woke cold and stiff of joint to find that Lawson had gone out, ~~without~~ earlier and had not returned for breakfast. At the time I felt a bit slighted over this, as we had arranged, the night before[.] to visit a wool scouring establishment about a mile out of town and try to secure a job there –

During the morning I ~~walked~~ as I was walking towards the main street in hopes of meeting him I saw him coming towards me, swing along, long slouching strides and head bent rather low, we were almost together before he saw me, and I noticed that his cheeks were flushed and his eyes were brighter than usual. ‘Can you paint?’ he almost shrieked. Remembering that he was the poet, I said ‘pictures?’ [‘Pictures be B-----!’] he rapped back, ‘Houses, fences, anything of wood and corrugated iron.’ He then explained that a publican who had built a number of cottages wanted men who had previous experience in painting to complete the job. Lawson asked again if I could paint and as a year or so earlier I had assisted my father in the painting of our cottage, and some out houses, to say nothing of a bullock waggon, and the family waggonette, I thought I was eligible for the job and said so. ‘We’ve to meet him at the pub at dinner time,’ Henry said, and with that end in view we hurried on, halting here and there by the way while he pointed out on newly painted walls and picket fences, the errors or otherwise of those who had recently wielded the paint brush. At the hotel where we were to meet our prospective employer a rather humorous interlude awaited us for as we entered the bar where there were two barmaids, one behind the bar: the other on the knee of a middle aged man on a form that rested beneath an open window, the man three sheets in

the wind, was swaying the girl to and fro, and lilting in a maudlin tone 'Rock a bye baby, on the tree top'

when the wind blows the cradle will rock,

when the winds stops[] – He had got thus far when a florid faced woman, of the washerwoman type, rushed in[] a fence paling in her two hands, she finished the refrain in a highly pitched voice, 'And down came ~~the barmaid~~ old Hopkins and barmaid and all', bringing the batten down on the man's head:

Lawson and I left the room hurriedly, but we got our painting job – a block of small weatherboard cottages – and after working a few days, I got the sack, mainly for my lack of knowledge in blending paints, for although when once mixed, I could apply the paint alright; some of the walls that I did had a semi-modernist ~~look~~ appearance.

Lawson got restless, one day his mind was made [up] to go back to the city, the next he would go with me to the bush, and so he became careless, and discontent[ed]: and in those days, a discontented Lawson was a problem, eventually he just lay down his brushes and walked out – as the saying today is –

Then a cheque from the Bulletin came for him and we continued for a week. A state election was coming in, and although at that time there was no Labour Party, the workers had their chosen man, and feelings ran pretty high.

One, 'Soapy' Andrews was their local leader, and he was also a keen advocate of Australian literature, and was greatly interested in Henry and his work. At times we would walk far out on the Common with him where he would bellow in Lawson's ear his views on the merits and otherwise of the political candidates, which, according to plan he was to write out in his own way, and by hook or crook, get it into one of the two local newspapers, but as at the time 'Capital must always lead' was their slogan, none of it ever saw printers ink. 'Soapy' had a small soap boiling plant on the outskirts of the town.

'Sydney or the bush', and the bush got it and one chilly morning Lawson and I with swags up (I've rarely seen meaner swags from that day to this) crossed the punt and headed for Fort Bourke Station, each wearing boots that were made for the pavements of the city rather than the rough unmade bush tracks of the West, and some miles out we came to a recently vacated surveyor's camp, and here we decided to camp, and do a little scavenging amongst the boots that had been cast off – I wore size eight, while Lawson who was an inch or so the taller took sevens or on a pinch he may wear sixes. This was about his only vanity, Henry was proud of his small feet, for what reason, I could never find out. We both secured a change of footwear, he had an odd blucher and an ordinary lace up, while my own were a dilapidated pair of Cossacks. The following day we were enrolled at the Fort Bourke shearing

shed, as rouseabouts, picking up the wool as the shearers flung the shorn sheep down the shoot and carrying it to the wool rollers at the long battened tables, – our light city boots came into their own at this job.

We were at Fort Bourke station for about three weeks[,] a dreary time it was, Henry was moody most of the evenings, as a rule lying on his bunk from tea time until the lights were out, talking very little and gazing at the cobwebby, corrugated iron roof, he was a man apart, having little in common with those whom he worked with. There were nights tho' that he would suggest a walk, and we might stroll a mile or so by some dusty bush track, at times meeting the Royal Mail coach on its long night journey to Wanaaring. Lawson often seemed moved and a little excited as in a cloud of dust and with a rattle and clocking of axles and the creak of leather, the mail rolled past. ‘What hopes and fears[,] what disappointment or gratification those mail bags bore’, he would say. And as we turned and went towards [our hut] he’d likely, say. ‘I’ll chuck this damned life and go back to the Rocks’ – and then, ‘we were often hungry there, but we were mostly happy’, and so on, his spirits rising and falling. One day he was a bushman and the bush was paradise, and perhaps the day following he would be in the dumps and the bush was all gloom and heartbreak. He was in the former mood the morning that we left Fort Bourke, and took the river road that in a few days lead [led] us to Toorale (pronounced Toorally) station that was owned by Sam McCaughey, later Sir Samuel, and whom, nearly thirty years later, Lawson met here at his beautiful riverside mansion, beside the Murrumbidgee. –

We were picking up wool there also, and little of note happened during the few weeks we were there. Henry got some verses ‘The Boss’s Boots[’], which were worn by Jimmy James, dapper little boss of the shearing board.

We stayed at Toorale till the shearing was over, and then with a third man we made north to the main Bourke-Wanaaring road. Little of interest happened, except that owing to this new mate allowing us to drink water that was contaminated by a dead snake, and showing us the remains of the reptile floating[.] We cast him off, and headed for the border town of Hungerford, where we worked for a few weeks on a wool scour. Our trip back to Bourke was uneventful. Lawson[,] who had gained weight and had become cheerful and fairly content while we were in the out back, now became restless and impatient, suggesting longer stages than we were doing, and although he did not mention it, I guessed that he had Sydney in his mind, events later proved that I was right as two days after our arrival at Bourke he made arrangements with a firm of stock agents: ‘Peter Anderson & Co.’ – of whom he later wrote some verses – for a drovers pass with some sheep that they were entraining for

the metropolis. And so we parted, not to meet again for more than a quarter of a century, during which time he had been to the other side of the world, and Fame ~~never~~ such as was never before or since, won by an Australian writer, was his. The world had been at his feet, but when I met him here in Leeton in 1916, he had changed little, and that little was for the better. He was cheerier, and his ~~walk~~ step was lighter and of course he had gained assurance that was sadly lacking in the old days.

I had written to him and when we met in the little street he knew me, and we talked as if the parting had only been a matter of months. 'Come down to my place['], he said, [']you will understand that so far we are only camping['], meaning that they had little or no furniture. At the house he asked me to meet his housekeeper, Mrs Byers [] and his dog: a bad tempered brute of a cattle dog breed that showed his teeth as I stroked him. During the evening Lawson said 'Have some hop beer', but I declined remarking, that I had just had some whisky with an auctioneer. Henry said quickly and slyly, 'I must meet that auctioneer[']. It was another old Bourke mate, one Leslie Magill, who was then a cripple and had started a cordial factory in the town [] who had supplied the hop beer.

A day or so later he came down to my place. I was away, so my wife put him in the lounge room, saying, 'There are some books', and also put half a bottle of wine beside him. He told her, 'I seldom drink wine', but when I arrived about an hour later, the half bottle was gone, and another had been taken from a shelf, and broached. Lawson was happy. The wine was of the lightest, and did him little harm.

A while later the Irrigation Commission loaned us a horse and cart to bring in some firewood. The horse was numbered and lettered on shoulder and hoof, and Lawson immediately named him 'Arrers', meaning broad arrows. However[,] the morning we were to go for the wood, he had had some words with his housekeeper, and he was very upset, not inclined to start out, but we got going, even then, he would attempt to jump out ~~and~~ in order to return and finish the argument, but each time he did, I'd whack the horse, which responded so freely, that Henry had to cling on to prevent himself from being thrown out. We went, one day to the township of Narrandera; about twenty miles, and as we missed the homeward train, we had to stay over night. The licensee of the hotel was very good to us, especially to Henry, and some weeks later he wrote him up in a story as the 'Unknown God of Narrandera'. I went to bed early, but he was restless and, at about one a.m. he strolled to the Railway Station, it was deserted, but there was a big brass bell there, which he tried out, so he said, by walking back and forth swinging it announcing an imaginary train he said, and as people came in at one end he slipped out

at the other; I did not see him until about ten next morning, when he met me in the street, doffing his hat, he said, 'They've cut the poet's hair' [and] 'the tragedy happened in East Street'. It was the shortest I had ever seen his hair, and by no means improved his appearance.

We took half a dozen bottles of beer home with us (the gift of the Unknown God) and on arrival at Leeton, we called at the newspaper office, where I suggested to him that we would offer the comps a drink. 'No! no!' he said, ['never give comps beer, it is like pouring water on a pavement']. I considered that he knew best, and we let it go at that.

We often went to the Murrumbidgee river, camping for a week end, and in these surroundings, I think I liked him best, he was so sincere and so earnest about everything, we seldom caught any fish, but that was a detail, didn't we have herrings and sardines in the tucker box!

It was on one of these trips that he told me of his meeting with King Edward, in England, the meeting had been arranged, and the King was in cog [incognito?]: but owing to Lawson's deafness a conversation was out of the question, and all Henry could remember, was, 'How do you do Mr Lawson, have a cigar Mr Lawson', and the meeting terminated.

During his stay at Leeton, he spent much of his time at our place, and became very fond of the children, who always addressed him as Uncle Harry, and he'd teach the younger ones to say it 'Wuncle'. When he finally left the Irrigation Areas, where he had been sent by the Holman Government, on a small salary, to write of the scheme, he had no idea that it was his final trip, as he had gone to Sydney on a free pass in connection with some private business and while in the city he decided to remain there. Casual as he was he did not trouble to inform the powers that were, that this was so. And as he laughingly told me later, 'They followed me all over Sydney to give me the sack']. Red tape was no good to Henry Lawson. About a year later some friends financed him on a trip to Gundagai from where he wrote me some fine letters, but he was ageing fast, and the change did him very little good, and in 1920 when I met him again at the Bulletin Office I was amazed and shocked at his appearance. We had a few happy days together in the city but one day he did not turn up, and they told me he was in hospital, and R. J. Cassidy ('Gilrooney') and I went out to see him, but he was a sick man, and when I left him I little thought that it was the last meeting.

I came back to the bush, and it was not very long till Tom Mutch wired me that he was dead. And I wrote the following verses ['The Bush Mourns'], which appeared in the Bulletin about a fortnight after his passing.

Jim Grahame

Annotation

'Jim Grahame' was the pen-name of James William Gordon (1874–1949). His verse, some of which had appeared in the *Bulletin*, was collected in *Call of the Bush* (Melbourne: Bread and Cheese Club, 1940) and *Under Wide Skies* (Citizens of Leeton, 1947).

This account by Grahame of his friendship with Lawson has not previously been published, but Colin Roderick, who had access to the manuscript, quoted from it in his *Henry Lawson: A Life* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1991). It has been transcribed from the manuscript in Grahame's handwriting, which is in the Cyril E Goode Papers [PA 291 Box 7] in State Library Victoria.

There is no date on the manuscript, but the detail in Grahame's description of meeting Lawson and the frankness of his comments on Lawson's temperament, would suggest that this was his first attempt to write down his memories. There is some muddle in his account of where he and Lawson worked as rouseabouts; and in other reminiscences he made no mention of their being at Fort Bourke station. Their period of employment was, as he says, about three weeks, and it was on Toorale station. Alan Barton points out that the memory of seeing the Royal Mail coach is wrongly attributed to the time when they were working at the station.

Grahame had less difficulty in sorting out his memories of meeting up again with Lawson at Leeton 23 years later. He recorded and apparently believed Lawson's fantasy of a meeting with Edward VII – as did a famous Australian historian many years later.

Two reminiscences by Grahame were published in his lifetime. 'Henry Lawson on the Track' appeared in the *Bulletin*, 19 February 1925, and includes two anecdotes that are not in the manuscript. The first is about seeing Aborigines 'in a semi-wild state', and reports Lawson's reaction ('They're a dying race, Jim, and they know it. I can read it in their eyes – I can read it in their eyes. I was suckled on a black breast, Jim.); and the second describes how Lawson took offence at the behaviour of the other man who was walking with them to Hungerford. Both anecdotes are retold in 'Amongst My own People', which Grahame contributed to *Henry Lawson By His Mates* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1931), but Lawson's claim to have been 'suckled on a black breast' is omitted.

John Barnes