

Launching of Paul Eggert *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson's While the Billy Boils* and Paul Eggert and Elizabeth Webby: *Henry Lawson While the Billy Boils: the original newspaper versions*, Sydney University Press, 2013.

Friends' Room, State Library of New South Wales, 17 April 2013.

Thirty six years ago, in late 1976 and early 1977, I spent some weeks at a warehouse in the Sydney suburb of Kingsgrove standing on a cement floor surveying the extensive archives of the publisher, Angus & Robertson and selecting what the Mitchell Library should purchase.

The archives covered the period from 1933 up to the early 1970s. The Library had acquired earlier archives up to 1932 not long before the publisher, George Robertson's death in 1933. Those archives had been carefully selected by Robertson himself, and in some cases annotated by him. The archives were sent to Britain to be handsomely bound in keeping with Robertson's desire for a permanent memorial to the firm's place in Australian publishing and no doubt to his leading role in that. The collection consisted of mainly authors' manuscripts and correspondence. No records recording business activities were included; either because they were still of use or because they were not considered of value; the latter most likely.

Many of the business records, therefore, dating from the 1880s were in 1976 at Kingsgrove. Their titles cited in *Biography of a Book* - Publishing ledgers, Payments record book, Publishing progress register, Publishing review and complimentary copies register etc – brings it all flooding back. I had to choose what was of research value. I was not sure what these business records would be used for; it was the more glamorous series of authors' manuscripts and correspondence which were thought much more collectable and for which there was a known clientele. But an archivist who only chooses for a known clientele is a dunce. I applied the standard archival test of whether these records recorded an important function of the organisation which they manifestly did. Who would use them and when was not a concern. To make it so would be to attempt to foretell the future.

So it makes an aged archivist enormously happy to have the usefulness of these records so triumphantly demonstrated in Paul Eggert's *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson's While the Billy Boils*. In the late

1970s when I was selecting these archives this sort of book-history was not even in its infancy.

We have all heard of *While the Billy Boils*. It is one of the indubitable classics of Australian literature and remarkably so considering it is a book of short stories. It was first published on 29 August 1896 and was still in print at least 27 years later in 1923, the year after Lawson's death. Lawson's stories have been in print ever since though not always that particular selection with that title.

Accompanying *Biography of a Book* is a new scholarly edition of *While the Billy Boils* edited by Paul Eggert with explanatory notes by Elizabeth Webby. But I shall come to this later.

*Biography of a Book* tells the engrossing and previously untold story of the making of this classic within the context of Lawson's life as well as the history of its continuing publication and reception up to the present day.

Henry Lawson was 29 when the book was published. He had endured an unhappy childhood, seen his parents separate, been persecuted at school and at work as an oddity, been afflicted with deafness, had started on the road to alcoholism and had just entered a marriage which would collapse after only six years. There was more to come, much more: depression, poverty, gaol (for non payment of maintenance), attempted suicide, hospitalisation (for alcoholism and depression) before he died at 55 in 1922 a wreck of a man and a pitiable sight on the streets of Sydney.

He had been publishing poems and stories in newspapers and magazines since he was 20 and a booklet – *Short stories in prose and verse* – had been published by his mother, Louisa, in 1894. It was badly printed and filled with typos and sold for one shilling. Lawson was embarrassed by it but thought it would be a historical curiosity and presented David Scott Mitchell with a copy for his collection. It was however well received and today it is a collector's item. In the booklet Lawson indicates that he will soon publish a real book.

Enter George Robertson who was embarking on a program of publishing Australian books. In 1895 he had published Banjo Paterson's *The man from Snowy River and other verses* and the next year in February 1896 published a book of Lawson's poems – *In the days when the world was wide and other verses*.

Later in 1896, in August, Robertson published *While the Billy Boils*. This was designed as a quality publication – the production values equalling those of imported British works of fiction. Australian fiction was to be dressed so that they took notice back Home. The book was illustrated and Robertson went to the trouble and expense of having the illustrations printed in Glasgow as there was not the expertise in Sydney. It was printed on good quality paper, with a gilt top edge and deckle-edged pages. It sold for 5 shillings just undercutting the standard British price for such a work of 6 shillings. The initial print run was 3,000 and another 3,000 were printed before year's end. 1900 sold in the first fortnight.

Previously, the publication of such works of fiction in Australia was usually paid for by the author; the publisher simply being the distributor. Not in this case. Robertson was developing a more professional Australian publishing program on a shared profit or royalties basis whereby the publisher took the financial risk. Nonetheless, Lawson, desperate for money as he would always be, sold his copyright and took £42 upfront. To his credit, Robertson later ignored this and once the £42 had been reached in what would have been royalties, began paying Lawson on the basis of sales even though he was under no legal obligation to do so.

The book consists of 52 stories – all except two had been previously published in newspapers. It was, though, a collaborative effort – Lawson was not in control - and it is this collaboration which is so skilfully unwoven and dissected in *Biography of a Book*. It would have far reaching consequences for Lawson's text.

The stories to be included were chosen by Lawson and the Angus & Robertson editor who was to work with Lawson, Arthur Wilberforce Jose. Robertson also had a hand in the selection.

Lawson had the opportunity to revise the stories and Jose edited them. Lawson could comment on this and there was a conversation about it. But, as Angus & Robertson was paying the piper, it would also be calling the tune.

Lawson was not averse to this. He wanted a book which would make London sit up and take notice and Jose acted accordingly.

Words and phrases were changed, added, or deleted; Australian vernacular expressions were toned down to spare the sensibilities of a British readership and not frighten the reviewers. As an aside - this protection of sensibilities was exactly what had happened with Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, the publication of which Lawson had arranged when he was in Britain in 1900. He reported to Miles that this had been done and that he had allowed it. Lawson knew the commercial realities and acquiesced; Miles, who knew nothing of publishing, was not amused.

Back to *While the Billy Boils* - spellings were standardized, which with Lawson often were an important part of characterisation; punctuation was changed which changed the rhythm of a passage; devices such as inverted commas and capitalisation which, in Lawson's case, conveyed a particular nuance were removed. The texts of Lawson's stories were corrupted and remained corrupt until now.

For over 110 years generations of readers have been engaged with texts which undersold Lawson.

Paul Eggert takes us through the making of the book; not only the textual changes but other relevant matters such as, for example, the commercial constraints of book publication which influenced the final product. Both Robertson and Lawson wanted a book and a book had to be of a certain length. So, almost at the last minute, two extra stories had to be written to pad out the volume so to speak.

The final literary product is often determined by commercial realities rather than artistic sensibility. It reminds me of those great arias in opera, now integral to the production, which were composed at the last minute because the star soprano threw a tantrum and wanted a bigger role or the overture to one of Mozart's opera which had to be rustled up in record time because opening night had been brought forward owing to the Grand Duke's birthday. Such is the reality of engagement with the market place.

George Robertson devised a marketing campaign for the book and maybe nothing has changed in this regard. Many of the reviewers simply incorporated in their reviews, without acknowledgment, quotations from the advertising copy, presenting these as their own opinions and, on at least one occasion, Robertson placed a paid advertisement in the *Australian Medical Gazette* and, would you believe it, a favourable

reviewed shortly appeared in that journal. But that seems to be the way business is done in NSW. 'Twas ever thus.

There is much in Eggert's tale of this book, its making, its life cycle and its reception. Much that contributes to literary history and gives us a greater understanding of this classic work.

One part which I found fascinating is the demolition of the myth of the 1890s which had been adumbrated previously by others but without the book-historical evidence which Eggert now brings to the table.

The 1890s, so the legend goes, saw the beginning of an authentically Australian literature with Lawson a key figure and *While the Billy Boils* an iconic text. But as Eggert makes clear 'There was no sudden revolution in taste ... towards things Australian, no matter how hard George Robertson worked to stir the cultural pot through his publishing initiatives'. Later interpreters of the 1890s mistook Robertson's sales pitch for a decisive swing in cultural temperament. The cultural environment, though, was much more varied. The stocks of second hand bookshops today and the extant catalogues of circulating libraries and literary institutes demonstrate the popularity of a host of non Australian authors: Dickens and Emerson and Bret Harte and Longfellow and Mark Twain, of Trollope and Kipling, of Shakespeare and the Bible *et alia*.

As for Lawson being central to this myth, Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery under Arms*, for example, had far higher sales than *While the Billy Boils*. This was owing to its British publisher, Macmillan's superior sales and distribution capacity. Robertson had tried in vain for a British publisher to take on *While the Billy Boils*.

'When critics talk about, say, the nationalist ideology to be found in Lawson's or other Bulletin writings', Eggert writes 'they are just as likely to be referring to a formation of the 1950s as of the decade they believe themselves to be discussing'.

He notes that the peak period for sales of Lawson's works was actually the postwar period especially from the late 1950s until the end of the 1980s. In a beguiling statistic he tells us that this very period was exactly the period when income disparity between the rich and the poor in Australia was at its least. It started to reduce from the 1940s and reached its lowest point in 1980. An egalitarian writer to suit an egalitarian era.

Turning now to the edition itself.

Reading this was for me a revelation. The text of the stories as first printed in newspapers has been restored. Footnotes and commentaries chart the changes to the text over the years and should you be so minded the reader is directed to the University of Sydney's escholarship website or to the State Library of New South Wales' website where digitised images of the Angus & Robertson printer's copy with its various changes, deletions and additions may be scrutinised.

This printer's copy was part of the original consignment of Angus & Robertson archives purchased by the Mitchell Library in 1932. Robertson knew it was a highlight of his collection and used it as a selling point; I think because he believed it showed the improvements Angus & Robertson had made to the native genius of Lawson.

The editorial team has interrogated this printer's copy thoroughly even to the extent of using magnification to trace markings which have been partly erased or are obscure. All this information is in the footnotes; the only surprise is that all those involved are not now blind.

This printer's copy and a first edition of *While the Billy Boils* are on display tonight.

Each story also has extensive explanatory notes which include glossaries explaining an Australian vernacular now almost lost. I don't know how many times I have read *The Bush Undertaker* but I never knew until now that Brummy (the drunk being buried) is an abbreviation of Brummagem ie of Birmingham and referred to cheap manufactured goods. I learnt a lot of other things too but do not wish to expose my woeful ignorance by listing them all.

Brummy is buried by the protagonist of the story with the words 'I am the rassarraction'. I don't quibble with the need to gloss this as a reference to John 11:25 and translate it 'I am the resurrection'; but simply note it is a poor reflection on the cultural baggage of today's students.

As the stories are now in chronological order the reader can appreciate Lawson's development as a writer and the seminal influence of his 1892-3 visit to Bourke and the Darling, the first time he actually experienced the great Australian outback. He wrote from there to his aunt Emma and said he would never return – and he never did. The original publication

obscured this by using an ordering which was governed by commercial considerations. Significantly, in view of the myth of the 1890s, it was the stories predating his visit to Bourke, which were most praised by contemporary reviewers not those which later critics would consider encapsulated the nationalist thesis.

In conclusion, in reference to these two books, I will simply quote what Lawson himself wrote to Miles Franklin on receiving the manuscript of *My Brilliant Career* in January 1900 – ‘I believe’, wrote Lawson, ‘you have done a big thing’. Or to be precise Professor Eggert and Professor Webby you have done two big things. Both books are milestones in Australian literary history, book history and scholarly editing. I congratulate you and indeed honour you.

Sydney University Press has done Eggert and Webby and Lawson proud by producing such handsome volumes.

The text of the new edition is so vibrant and captivating that I wonder whether Sydney University Press might consider publishing it in a cheaper paperback, maybe removing some of the more detailed textual notes but certainly retain the explanation of John 11:25, so that this edition may become the standard reading edition of Lawson. I hope so. Anyway, I have my free copies which will continue to bring me immense pleasure and instruction but I assure you, unlike the *Australian Medical Gazette* and its review of *While the Billy Boils mutatis mutandi*, my free copies had no influence over my comments this evening.

What would Lawson think being accorded both a scholarly edition and a book-history of his most famous work 91 years after its first appearance. Well, I don't think he would be surprised. Yes, his personal life was a wreck, and yes in a life of 55 years only maybe 10 years or so were his truly creative years. He was finished as a writer at age 35. I don't think he would have been surprised by the state funeral either or the statue which was erected in 1931, by the streets and other things named after him, by the competitions and prizes in his name and the literary festivals in Grenfell, the place of his birth, and Gulgong, near where he lived for a time. In fact, any place connected with Lawson is now quick to claim him. Last year I found myself in Leeton, as one does, and made the pilgrimage to the cottage in which he lived. I am rather partial to literary tourism.

One of Lawson's most admirable qualities was persistence, he never gave up on himself and continued to write long after his use by date,

hoping things would come good. And as *Biography of a Book* makes clear he took his writing very seriously indeed and the much discussed artlessness was the result of hard graft. He knew his texts were mangled. But he knew it would all come right in the end.

I finish with one stanza of his poem *Soul of a Poet* of 1905.

You read and you saw without seeing/  
My work seemed a trifle apart/  
While the truth of things thrilled through my being/  
and the wrong of things murdered my heart!/  
Cast out and despised and neglected/  
and weak, and in fear, and in debt/  
My songs mutilated, rejected/  
Shall ring through the Commonwealth yet!

Let them ring out through these two splendid books which I now with great pleasure officially launch.

Paul Brunton  
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