

Reply speech: Lawson books launch, 17 April 2013, Mitchell Library

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My sincere thanks to Paul Brunton whose long career as curator of manuscripts here at the Mitchell has made him such an admired figure. He loved his work, he served the Library surpassingly well and he represents in his now emeritus role all the best traditions of this oldest of Australiana research libraries. I will not forget his genuine surprise and delight when I asked him to launch these Lawson books. He had not felt himself worthy to do so. That, I have to say, is the only error in which I have caught him out.

I have also to thank the Library more generally. Its enlightened policies in granting access – including, vitally, through digital facsimiles – to unique and fragile manuscript materials were the difference between my writing something genuinely new and yet another rehash of what was already known, or, more accurately, thought to be known, about the myths around Lawson, Angus & Robertson and the 1890s in colonial New South Wales. It is such a privilege to work at the edges of what is known. I thank Paul and all his colleagues including Maggie Patton, our host tonight, for making me, as a scholar, feel welcome here, in visit after visit after visit, and for patiently answering my numerous email enquiries.

One anecdote – this time about rare books – should give you the flavour of researching in the reading room here. I was following up on a hunch that the early prose writing of Rudyard Kipling was, at least in George Robertson's mind, the model for a successful author dealing with colonial subject matter that might *sell*. Before Macmillan in London published Kipling's breakthrough collection of short stories *Plain Tales from the Hills* in 1890 Kipling, then living in India, had already had, I discovered, many of them published in cheap booklet form in the Allahabad Railway Library. It was aimed at the new phenomenon in India of railway travellers likely to be in need of reading matter and purchasing it at bookstalls on the railway platform. I had never heard of the Allahabad Railway Library. What were the chances that the State Library of New South Wales would have the booklets? With a heavy heart I turned to the old card catalogue waiting to be disappointed. Yet there they all were, sure enough, and I called them up. You'll guess whose wobbly signature was in them: 'D. S. Mitchell'. I knew I was in the right place.

I have to admit that there is one drug I cannot resist and that many of you here tonight will also have imbibed. I mean that feeling of newness, of discovery, as you stumble across information in documents that

have not seen the light of day for decades or sometimes, as in the case of those nearly transparent onion-skin-paper letterbooks that preceded carbon paper, are on the edge of crumbling as you read them. What you learn invariably prompts more questions that prompt even more. You nearly drown in the detail. You keep coming up for air. Tentative patterns begin to emerge that you'll follow up on tomorrow. You look at your watch and hours have gone past. You've nearly missed the ferry, again. You feel tired but really good. And the library is closing. You get a move on down the hill to Circular Quay.

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There are many people outside this library who also richly deserve my thanks. I have mentioned them in the Preface to both volumes and won't repeat them all again tonight. But I would like especially to thank my collaborator of many years standing now, Elizabeth Webby, who not only prepared the explanatory notes for the edition but also read the MS of *Biography of a Book* more than once. Unfortunately she couldn't be here tonight although she dearly wanted to attend. I also thank my research assistant Meredith Sherlock, who has the closest eye for textual detail of anyone in Melbourne and has spent decades now working for scholarly editors like me. I also thank Chris Tiffin, who has come down from Brisbane for the launch. He prepared the index and copy-edited the MS of the monograph, saving me from many embarrassments. And I thank Robert Dixon and Craig Munro for their shrewd advice and support, and Susan Murray-Smith of Sydney University Press and Ross Coleman of the Fisher Library for believing in the project, which took rather longer than predicted, and also Agata and Dushan Mrva Montoya at the Press who have made the jackets look handsome and have managed to keep the price down. That's a hint! I am also going to thank in advance Peter Kirkpatrick for agreeing to read one of Lawson's sketches here tonight. You'll soon appreciate why we asked Peter to read. Thank you all for coming out tonight to help me celebrate the coming into the world of these two books.

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I can hardly believe it has happened. When I think of the six or seven years in which they occupied most of my waking hours, sometimes to the despair, sometimes to the amusement of my wife, Anna Eggert, I recall a poem by Lawson's colonial predecessor Charles Harpur.

Harpur voiced that sense of relief, tinged with a little sadness, of many an author who has just finished what he hopes and believes is a worthwhile book and which he has put a great deal into. As it sits there on the table for the first time as a finished object, it reminds you that

the part of your life that its writing has consumed has now shifted irremediably into the past at the very moment that it moves into the present of your readers. The poem – it's a 14-line sonnet – and written in 1851 is called:

*Sonnet on Completing 'The Wild Bee of Australia'.*

My work is finish'd, that hath been to me

An only solace for this many a day;

But whether it, in other company,

May so beguile the time *and hue the ray*

*Of Loneliness and Thought*, I cannot say;

Nor whether with the future it shall be

A Book of Note; nor whether, presently,

'Tis doom'd to melt like a thin cloud away

Yet whatsoever be its worldly lot

I know that, *like a hive, with love 'tis stored;*

And that though all its pages I have not

Written one wilfully misleading word;

Nor traced one feeling that my heart ignored,

Or line that Truth has counselled me to blot.

The saddest thing is that, unknown to Harpur when he wrote the sonnet, it didn't appear. That's another reason why I feel privileged tonight – the contrast of opportunity – and why I thank you for helping me to celebrate colonial culture here tonight.