

**Zeitschrift:** Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne  
**Herausgeber:** Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres  
**Band:** - (1993)  
**Heft:** 3

**Buchbesprechung:** Compte rendu bibliographique

**Autor:** Ommundsen, Wenche

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 30.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## COMPTE RENDU BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson. A Life* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991)

Henry Lawson (1867-1922) occupies a central place in Australian literature and Australian history; indeed, his name has come to stand as a symbol for a national identity which in the 1890s was emerging from under the colonial yoke and which today, a century later, survives as a powerful, if not particularly accurate, myth of cultural origin. His famous moustache is reproduced on the Australian ten dollars bill (and, one might add, under a great many contemporary Australian noses); his poems and short fiction still provoke heated debate in academic circles. Much loved and passionately hated, Henry Lawson is the stuff legends are made of, and the myths that have arisen around his life constitute the Australian version of the Abe Lincoln story (Lincoln, as we all know, was born in the log cabin he helped his father to build). So, according to the legend, Lawson was born of gypsy stock in a tent on the goldfield in the midst of a flood and spent his life roaming his beloved bush. The alternative version of the Lawson legend portrays a down-and-out poet who only left the gutters of Sydney for his frequent visits to mental hospitals, asylums for alcoholics, or jail. The truth, as usual, is less poetic and more complex.

Colin Roderick, the author of the new (and probably "definitive") biography of Lawson, sees it as one of his central tasks to dispel the most tenacious myths about the man. He offers convincing evidence that Lawson was born, not in a tent, but in a bush hospital, and traces his ancestry on each side in great detail to reveal a background of Norwegian seafarers and English peasants without a trace of gypsy blood. In contrast to other passionate but less accurate accounts of Lawson's life (Manning Clark's *In Search of Henry Lawson*, for example), Roderick sets himself the task of providing an objective and balanced story. If *he* is driven by passion, it is a passion for truth.

Roderick cites examples of the kinds of reaction which have earned Lawson his place in the Australian national tradition. Here are the words of John Tighe Ryan, writing in the *Gundagai Times* on the publication of Lawson's first collection of fiction, *When the Billy Boils* (1896):

Poor Lawson is a true son of the Australian bush, a genius to the finger tips. He is ignorant of the manners of good society; indeed, it is questionable if he ever entered a drawing-room, if he ever owned a dress or even a tailor-made suit, or if his lips ever touched a champagne glass. He is a waif of the bush and the city, an awkward youth of twenty-seven, who never entered a college, or got within speaking distance of a University Professor. He spent his childhood and youth in a tent... He is known in the back-blocks as a swagman, and in the city his figure is familiar in cheap restaurants. And yet he is the greatest gift the gods have so far given to Australia...

p. 162

Against the idealised vision of the bard as a hero of the people stands this assessment, published in the *Australian* in 1982:

a lousy, no-good bum... a petulant narcissist, drifter, lay-about, sponger, chauvinist, neo-totalitarian, racist, alcoholic, jail-bird, misfit, and congenital liar.

p. viii

Roderick tackles these opposing portraits of the writer by seeking to explain how it was possible for the same man to inspire the greatest admiration and the greatest contempt. Lawson's sins he attributes on the one hand to his alcoholism (which he claims was hereditary), on the other to a personality disorder he diagnoses as manic depression. He may well be right, but by insisting on a pathological pattern of behaviour he runs the risk of appearing to present a case rather than give an impression of the man. The positive sides of the writer (his great charm, his generosity, his remarkable abilities) are acknowledged but somehow left out of the portrait. The reader (especially a reader not familiar with Lawson's writing) is unlikely to gain from this biography a clear understanding of the qualities that transformed a weak man and uneven writer into a national symbol.

One can appreciate the reasons why Roderick's account comes across as primarily negative or defensive. As a response to the excessive claims made by both Lawson's detractors and his defenders, it had to strike an even balance; it is also understandably wary of advancing any theory or interpretation of the writer's character not backed up by undisputable evidence. It is nevertheless the sad con-

sequence that in this biography excessive fact and evidence come in the way of the reader's access to Lawson. Roderick's scholarship and the extent of his research are impressive, but a life is more than the trivia it leaves behind, and in order to capture more than glimpses, the biographer should perhaps have allowed himself an occasional excursion into the art of the novelist. Henry Lawson offers a great number of compelling self-portraits in his own writing, and while Roderick has every reason to question the factual accuracy of Lawson's autobiographical fiction, his portrayal would have been richer had he captured more of that curious mixture of cynicism and sentimentality which characterises the Lawsonian persona in his work.

Roderick's book is organised according to a strict chronological principle, leaving little room for summary or generalisation. It carefully traces the writer's moves from his birth in the obscure country town of Grenfell in 1867 to his state funeral in St. Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney, in 1922. From the bush to Sydney, from there to New Zealand, Western Australia, London and back again, Henry Lawson pursues his tireless quest for money and fame and, in his later years, seeks to escape the ravages of his erratic life. His literary career gets an early start through the agency of his mother Louisa Lawson, writer and editor of a feminist journal, and he soon becomes involved in a number of radical intellectual movements in Sydney, particularly in the group of nationalist and republican enthusiasts centered around the journal the *Bulletin*. His literary output during the nineties is remarkable, and although a great deal of his poetry and some of his fiction are undistinguished, this is also the period when much of his best writing is produced. By the age of thirty Lawson had gained the reputation of being the genuine voice of a country struggling for nationhood, but while his fame continued to rise, his personal fortunes were soon launched on a downward path. Attempting to make a living out of writing, but chronically incapable of holding on to the frequently generous sums of money advanced by his editors and friends, he soon became imprisoned in a pattern of behaviour which would mark the rest of his life: moments of affluence, hope and extravagance alternating with periods of depression and utter destitution. Lawson married in 1896, but his conjugal bliss was short-lived. In 1900 he took his wife Bertha and two babies to London to try his luck, but the misery of their existence there soon resulted in Bertha's mental break-down and estrangement. Back in Australia in 1902 she obtained legal separation, but her claims for maintenance added to Lawson's financial woes, and he was repeatedly imprisoned for non-payment. The last

twenty years of Lawson's life are generally considered a period of steady decline. His alcoholism worsened, his mental health was precarious and his behaviour often so appalling that his friends paid him to stay away from them. His literary output was still considerable, but his writing was patchy, rarely living up to the promise of his earlier years.

Dwelling on the writer's financial miseries and drunken antics, Roderick offers a portrait of a tragic life: a man fully aware of his own weakness, but unable to do anything to improve his lot. What there was of genius, if any, does not come through in these pages, or is passed over as material unsuitable for an objective biographical account. The cultural contexts of Lawson's life also remain sketchy. Roderick's book thus makes for rather frustrating reading, and has to be supplemented by other types of knowledge, literary, psychological, and historical. Perhaps this is as it should be. Literary biography is a problematic genre, never more so than when the biographer allows the distinctions between fact and fiction to become blurred. One thing the biography should never be is a substitute for the writer's work itself. But in the light of recent biographies (Peter Ackroyd's biography of Charles Dickens comes to mind, and in the Australian context, Brian Matthews' lively account of the life of Louisa Lawson) which ostentatiously play with fictional form in order to question biographical "truth", it has also become difficult to present the life of a writer as a reconstitution based on fact alone. Roderick's book marks a necessary stage in the history of Lawson scholarship, but it is not "definitive" in the sense that it will discourage others from trying, from different angles, to capture the complex truth of Henry Lawson, man, writer, and cultural icon.

To the contemporary student of Australian culture, the central place accorded Henry Lawson in the national tradition is something of a puzzle. For one thing, poor Henry is an unlikely hero: a pitiful figure who would praise and condemn his country in the same breath, and whose nostalgia for his idealised Australian bush was characterised by, as Roderick puts it, "the habit of looking backward to a life that had never been." (p. 180) Besides, the Australia which greets today's visitor differs greatly from the nation Henry Lawson described—or invented. Australia is a highly urbanised country; its inhabitants are suburbanites rather than bush dwellers. It is also a cosmopolitan and multicultural society which has recognised the necessity to leave behind the all-white, Euro-centered culture which Lawson, in spite of everything, is seen to represent. It can perhaps be said that Henry Lawson has been retained as a symbol for old

Australia, a tradition against which all new versions of a national identity are measured and evaluated. Interestingly, Lawson's most famous story, "The Drover's Wife", has in recent years inspired a number of contemporary writers to write *their* version of the tale, in which they deliberately take issue with its portrayal of Australian life and its status as national myth. If Henry Lawson, the man and his writing, still can be seen to touch a central nerve of Australian culture I would suggest, moreover, that it has to do with the very contradictions inherent in his character. Lawson's ambivalence about his country, his endearing frankness when exposing both national and personal shortcomings, his ability to laugh at heroism and failure alike have left Australia with a legacy many nations in both the new and the old world sadly miss. Debunking the myth of heroism, questioning its own idealised visions of democracy, mateship and courage, the legacy of Henry Lawson survives as a powerful antidote to the whole idea of cultural nationalism, preventing Australians from taking any story of their own cultural identity and origins too seriously.

Wenche OMMUNDSEN