

Henry Lawson and the Salvation Army - Stuart Devenish.

On February 19, 2009 Salvation Army Major Bob Broadbere (retired) presented a lecture entitled 'Henry Lawson and his place in Salvation Army History' to an audience of approximately 70 people, mainly Salvation Army officers and soldiers at the Salvation Army's Booth College campus at Bexley North, Sydney. The connection between Lawson and the Salvation Army has held an enduring fascination for Broadbere who has amassed a comprehensive personal library on Henry Lawson and his association with the Salvation Army. Having corresponded with the late Prof. Colin Roderick (editor of the 3 volume Henry Lawson, Collected Verse, A & R, Sydney, 1966-8) Broadbere is something of a specialist in the field. His interest in Henry Lawson sprang to life when Broadbere himself lived and worked in the St Leonards-North Sydney areas where Lawson had lived. Permission was obtained from Major Bob Broadbere to reproduce here some of his research as presented in his lecture.

The 'Army' in Lawson's Poetry

The connection between Henry Lawson and the Salvation Army remains largely unknown in any of the contexts relevant to it, e.g., the Salvation Army, the Christian community, or the wider Australian population. In part this is because writers such as Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson are not so well known nor so carefully read as they once were. Our understanding of the connection between Lawson and the Salvation Army is not helped by the oblique nature of Lawson's writing about the Army. According to private correspondence between Roderick and Broadbere, Lawson never threw himself on the mercies of the Army despite his alcoholism and illness later in life. The relationship between the two is subsidiary, but important.

The Salvation Army is a clearly identifiable sub-theme in Lawson's writings. In 1888 Henry Lawson wrote 'Faces in the Street', a poem which captured the lives of people of Sydney going about their harried urban existences. According to Broadbere the poem captured Lawson's observations as he walked from his Phillip Street residence to the Redfern station to catch the train to his employment at Hudson Bros at Clyde. "I used to see the same backwash and eddy and the stream of life — the debris of people — mornings and evenings when the workmen's train ran on time. I remember one girl or woman, another that sticks out in a memory picture, but seems in her right place. You'll see her face over and over again in the little Salvation Army street gathering at night in all weathers." Not only are Lawson's powers of observation apparent in this stanza, but also his strong sense of identification with his fellow human beings and his concern for their welfare. At one level the connection could be seen to be merely descriptive in the case of 'Faces in the Street', but in the light of his later writing where the Salvation Army is more central to his concern, what begins as a tenuous link becomes a much stronger connection over time.

Short Stories

In 1893 Lawson wrote a short story entitled 'When the Army prays for Watty'. According to William Wood, Watson Braithwaite is the 'Watty' referred to by Lawson. By this time William Wood and Mary Gilmore had already left to join the Australian utopian community in Paraguay. Watty joined them later.

Watson was at that time the licensee of the Carrier Arms hotel in Bourke in 1892/3. From his vantage point perched on a seat in the Carrier Arms hotel, Lawson appears to have enjoyed the unfolding tensions between the licensee Watson and the Salvation Army band which played in the street outside. While the Army band lectured against the evils of the drink and the need for those at the bar to have their souls saved — especially the licensee — Watty is reported to have looked on with smiling indifference from the hotel verandah.

In 1901 Lawson wrote the short story 'That Pretty Girl in the Army'. It describes a certain 'Sister Hannah' whom Lawson implies was a Salvation Army Officer lass. Her embrace of a lost love in the Army band could well have constituted an improper action for an Officer which might have resulted in her being stood down; although the Salvation Army has no record of the said 'Sister Hannah' or of any such action being taken with regard to her. But commentators have observed that the events are not historical reportage but fanciful re-construction. Sources close to Lawson suspect that the action does not take place in outback Bourke but originate from Lawson's sojourn in London. Lawson had separated from his wife and was working from London as a writer, and experiencing at a distance the painful separation from a woman back in Australia whom he had come to love as his soul-mate. He interpolated this woman into the story. Roderick wrote, "That pretty girl in the Army was a portrait of the woman who was his spiritual bride, Hannah Thornburn." A lost love, Thornburn was an important recurring theme at the close of Lawson's life.

Military Images

It is apparent that Lawson had a good working knowledge of the Salvation Army and its culture of social work and faith. In his poem 'Charity' (1909) Lawson wrote, "There is a duty, that is Charity, a duty that none may shirk; from the widow's mite in the alley, that goes for Christian work; to the quid chucked into the ring, by a drunken shearer at Bourke." On a more militaristic theme is the poem 'Booth's Drum [1]' written in 1915. The poem depicts the Salvation Army's war against sin, wickedness and evil in Australian society, but it does so against the backdrop of the Great War unfolding in Europe. Geographically, it traversed the nation from Darwin to Melbourne, from Sydney to Perth; as well as internationally from Greenland to India, China and Japan where the Army had commenced its ministries. Ideologically it rehearsed the single-mindedness of the Army's soldiers as they 'banged the drum' and 'fired a volley' for righteousness around the world, inspired by Booth's passionate call to righteousness. "But they took us out of prison, and they took us out of Hell. And they helped our fallen sisters who went down for such as we, and our widows and our orphans in distress and poverty, and neglected wives and children of the worst advice that be; and they made us fit for Glory — or another Glorious Spree. ... They Have Found a Real Devil, and are Going after Him (with a Bible and a Rifle they are going after him)".

'Booth's Drum' was included in a book of poetry entitled *Song of the Dardanelles* popular among soldiers sent to the European front lines. The poem echoes the Army's efforts on the front line where up to 20,000 Salvationists from around the world served as enlisted army soldiers, as Red Cross workers or as chaplains to the Allied troops at Passchendaele, the Dardanelles, Tobruk and elsewhere, where the drums of war beat with all the passion and terror that only war can bring. But those same drums also reverberated around the country towns and communities of Australia like a rifle shot. Just as the Salvation Army took the needs of the soldiers seriously, they also took the needs of their home-communities seriously, including the physical and spiritual needs of the young and old in the community. 'Booth's Drum [11]' observed that Booth's drum was rarely heard in Australian communities any more, largely because so many officers and soldiers had gone to the war-front that there were few left at home to beat the drum. But with the war's end imminent, the Army's silent drums were about to begin beating again: "But what the army people lack shall be fully restored to them; for 'Captain Tom' is coming back

with one leg and a DSM, and Booth's old drum shall wake once more (Good Lord! They'll bang the barracks down!); and One-eyed Billy, as of yore, shall save the humour of the town."

The Truth Concerning Lawson's Life

As Broadbent has discovered, discerning the truth concerning Lawson's life is not easy, given his mythical status in the Australian psyche. In an earlier lecture presented in 2004 entitled 'The Spirituality of Henry Lawson', (also delivered at Booth College, Bexley, Sydney), Broadbent attempted to unravel the multiple unsubstantiated claims made about Lawson by various people. From within Lawson's own family, his sister Gertrude appeared to actively encourage un-truths in order to increase the mystique surrounding Henry, ostensibly to add to the renown of the bard and his family, including herself. In the negative, Lawson's publisher David McKee Wright exercised an unwelcome editorial licence which often mutilated Lawson's writing, but couldn't destroy the brilliance of the work of the man who came to be known as 'the people's poet'. It has been observed that for expatriate Australians living overseas, reading Lawson is tantamount to taking a quick trip home to smell the gum leaves and taste the scones and billy tea. Who of us born in this country can read the 'Loaded Dog' without having our entire national and personal history evoked within us and our emotions strangely stirred? The singing poet David Gordon Kirkpatrick (Slim Dusty) also lionised Lawson and set his poems to music so that for older Australians 'Middleton's Rouseabout' and 'Do They Think that I do not Know?' have become a part of the mythology of our generation. The social manipulation of Lawson's persona causes us to ask which image of Lawson is the correct one: the man, the poet or the mystical persona reconstituted in cultural memory?

There has been a tendency on the part of Christians to 'appropriate' Henry Lawson to the Christian cause, seeking to (falsely) include him in the number of the redeemed. This is not hard to understand in the light of the complexity of Lawson's writing about all matters religious. On the one hand Lawson was scathing of institutional religion, as in his poem 'The Christ of the 'Never' (1898), where educated clergymen preached without any knowledge of the lives of the people to whom they ministered. Yet on the other hand Lawson can admit his being "deeply religious" to his publisher and to indicate in 'Booth's Drum [III]' "That I was saved one strenuous night, in old North Sydney years ago." No wonder Christians thought he was "one of us", and Salvationists tended to see him more as an insider than an outsider. One source states, "All that Lawson lacks to make him a thoroughly good Salvationist was a clear spiritual vision." But Lawson — despite his admiration for the Salvation Army through its work with the Anzac diggers and its tireless work for the well-being of the Aussie battler in the bush and the 'burbs — resisted being lumped in with the religious ideals of the Army. When commentators variously assumed that Lawson had 'got saved', become 'religious' or had 'found Christ', Lawson reputedly stated angrily to his editor, "Do you want my readers to think that the Salvation Army has got a hold of Henry Lawson?"

Common and Uncommon Ground

In the final analysis it can be agreed that there is a good deal of overlap between Lawson's bush socialism and the Salvation Army's religious socialism. Lawson loved the common people, and presents in such poems as 'Faces in the Street' an impassioned plea on the part of the homeless, the drifter, the flotsam and jetsam of humanity — the very self-same people the Salvation Army stood alongside to love and support. The kinds of personal resurrections that Lawson saw in those whom society belittled must have exerted a positive influence on him. One source remembers, "In those far-off days amongst the testifiers in The Army ring who captured the attention of Henry Lawson, were two converted bullockies. They were won for the Lord by the practical Christianity of Captain Alex Miller (the Jolly Miller) who was equally at home shearing sheep, riding buck-jumpers, 'punching' bullocks or praying for souls." John Cleary, ABC commentator, writer and Salvationist himself, wrote in 2000, "Perhaps nowhere has the Australian sympathy for the Salvation Army been better exhibited than in the work of

the poet Henry Lawson. This historic Australian tradition of 'mateship' embraced great compassion for the underdog and suspicion of authority, particularly those authorities that wrap themselves in the moral cloak of religion. This attitude of pharisaic religion is particularly evident in the work of Lawson. Lawson's bush and city stories are tough on the clergy. Like many today he despised institutional religion. Yet he had a soft spot for the Army." Yet Lawson also posed questions to The Salvation Army; questions such as why the Army was so quick to get involved in an imperialistic war such as WWI, and why the Army which had such a good track record in rescuing alcoholics from their addiction, was unable to provide Lawson the assistance he needed towards the end of his life? Lawson died an alcoholic, and spent his last days in the care of a Mrs Beyers. The answers to those questions may never be answered, but there remains an important connection, as yet largely un-explored, between Henry Lawson and the Salvation Army. The work of Major Bob Broadbent has begun to unpack this fascinating connection, for which we owe him a debt of gratitude.

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