Eden

HENRY LAWSON

BILL, the VENTRILOQUIAL ROOSTER

AND

OTHER YARNS

HENRY LAWSON

BILL, the VENTRILOQUIAL ROOSTER

AND

OTHER YARNS

Selected and introduced by
COLIN RODERICK

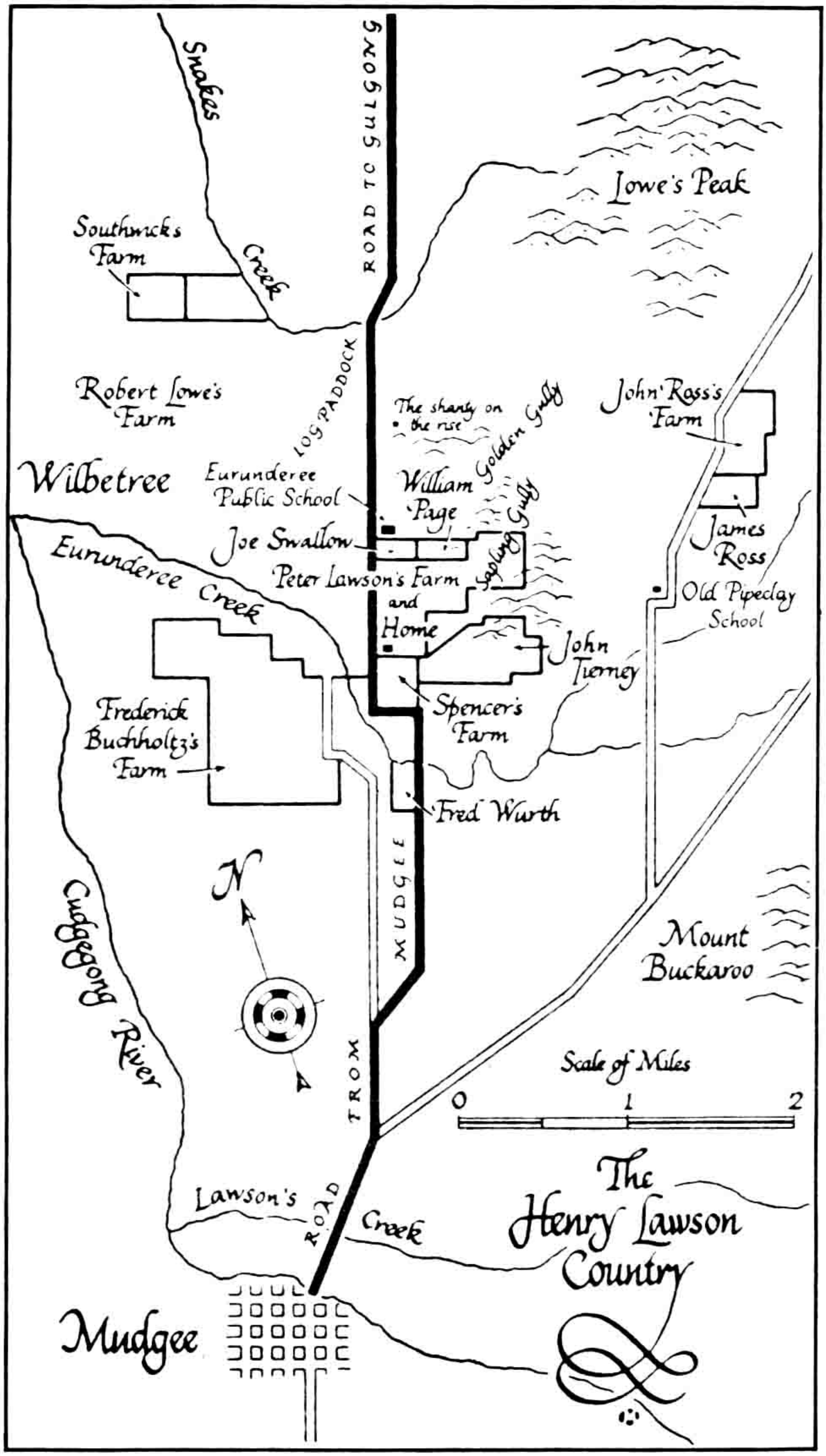
EDEN PAPERBACKS
an imprint of Angus & Robertson Publishers

Unit 4, Eden Park, 31 Waterloo Road,
North Ryde, NSW, Australia 2113, and
16 Golden Square, London W1R 4BN,
United Kingdom

First published in Australia
by Angus & Robertson Publishers as Fifteen Stories *in 1959*
A&R Classics edition 1975
Reprinted 1978, 1982, 1985
This Eden edition 1988

ISBN 0 207 15941 6

Printed in Australia by The Book Printer


Snakes Creek
Southwicks Farm
ROAD TO GULGONG
Lowe's Peak
Robert Lowe's Farm
LOG PADDOCK
The shanty on the rise
Golden Gully
John Ross's Farm
Wilbetree
Eurunderee Public School
William Page
Joe Swallow
Eurunderee Creek
Peter Lawson's Farm and Home
Sapling Gully
James Ross
Old Pipeclay School
John Tierney
Frederick Buchholtz's Farm
Spencer's Farm
Fred Wurth
MUDGEE
N
Cudgegong River
Mount Buckaroo
Scale of Miles
0
1
2
TROM
Lawson's Road
Creek
The Henry Lawson Country
Mudgee

INTRODUCTION

I

THIS selection from Henry Lawson's writings is meant to introduce him to the twentieth-century reader who comes fresh to Australian literature.

It is important that all Australians know something of the work that has gone to make their country what it is. And this is just as true of its art and music and literature as of its industries and politics. In fact, no one national activity can be separated from the rest without national loss. Without art and literature there could be no history, and all the activity of the generations of men would end in oblivion.

We live today in a world community. Within that great community we cluster in national groups, each of which has its own traditions, its own ideals, its own history. The way in which the people of a particular community order their lives, the kind of houses they occupy, the type of schools they build—these are as distinct from those of most other groups as the native animals and trees. They go to make up a national culture. Culture is not something tacked on to the everyday processes of working, eating, learning and playing—as if it were a superficial achievement, separate from the basic business of living. It *is* living. The sensitive minds of writers who live in the same environment as we do are able to pick out the pattern of this culture and so enable us to distinguish its several parts. Such men and women help to mould our traditions. In their writings we find pleasure and inspiration. We see our own people through their eyes, and we understand ourselves better. We also understand better the way our society has developed. We see more clearly

the direction in which our particular community is moving. Some of us are inspired to write our own reactions to the behaviour of our fellow-citizens.

Allied with a knowledge of the great books produced by people in other countries, the knowledge of our own people's books makes us better fitted to share in the work of developing the country in accordance with universal principles of truth and justice.

The Australia that Henry Lawson knew, the Australia reflected in this selection, was the base upon which our society has grown.

Although we are separated from it by a generation, there are still many people alive who knew Lawson personally. All agree that no other Australian writer has devoted himself so whole-heartedly to the Australian scene. There is scarcely a part of it that he did not know and write about: the dry outback of New South Wales; the central districts; the goldfields; the coast and the city; Melbourne; shipboard life; Western Australia in its boom days of gold; New Zealand in the bitter 1890s; Queensland.

The range of his settings is equalled by the range of his characters. He never attempted to draw people he did not know; and because his life was for the most part spent among the poor, his characters, like the best of Dickens's, belong to their world. It was the world of the drover, the prospector, the miner, the rouseabout, the shearer, the railway worker, the swagman and the sundowner, the cocky, the timbergetter, the underpaid apprentice, the bushwoman, the city larrikin, the bushranger, the spieler, the washerwoman, the broken-down gentleman, the unemployed. These are Lawson's types, and he looked into their lives with pity and indignation.

The Legend of Lawson that persists in the public mind is the legend of a bush poet, at odds with the world, melancholy, suspicious, disgruntled. Like many legends, it is

less than half the truth. He was in reality a sensitive artist, a true poet. His poetic expression was hampered through lack of education. He did not care to experiment in rhythms and verse forms. A great deal of his poetic feeling, and the best of his art, went into his short stories. They are charged with poetry and are as much poems as any that are arranged in stanzas and measured verses. The personal note is never absent from them. Pervading them is Lawson's temperament—a blend of humour, cynicism and charity.

II

Part I of this selection, "Background", brings three sketches together to describe Lawson's journey to Bourke, his sojourn there, and his return. This occurred in 1892-3, when he was 25 years of age. The 1890s were years of bitterness and hardship. Disillusioned men found themselves with no work to do, and in the western districts the wool industry was in a state bordering on civil war. Squatter and shearers hated each other bitterly. The shearer was a nomad, travelling often on foot from shed to shed over dry country in the hope of finding work. His pay was poor, 17s. 6d. a 100 sheep, and out of his earnings he had to buy food at high local prices. Work began at six in the morning and went on until half an hour before sunset. Lawson was never a shearer, and the only work he could get out back was that of a rouseabout and picker-up at "a pound a week and station prices". He happened to go to the west at the end of the season, and with a mate he tramped the dry country looking for work at sheds where a handful of sheep remained to be shorn. In Lawson's outback sketches we see in vivid prose the unsatisfactory conditions of the industry in those rough-and-ready days—the wasted weeks spent in tramping from shed to shed, the uncertainty of work at the end of the tramp, the meagre rates of pay, the absence of humane living conditions, the unfair price of rations. These things

belong to the bad old days: the institution of the Arbitration Court has made them a thing of the past. Reflected in Lawson's stories, they serve as a reminder that good human relationships are a most important factor in the development of a peaceful society.

Part II is in humorous vein. It introduces two contrasting types, the bush philosopher who never makes a visible mistake and who always comes out on top, and the bush simpleton, the butt of all practical jokes, the man who never does anything right. The first of these characters is Jack Mitchell, the second Dave Regan. Jack Mitchell is the principal character in the first three stories, while Dave Regan follows, being separated from him by Macquarie the shearer and his dog Tally. Three of the Dave Regan stories are set in New South Wales. The fourth, "The Ghostly Door", takes Dave to New Zealand, and leads naturally to "His Country—After All", the celebrated story in which Lawson gives Australian expression to love of country.

Part III presents Lawson in his mood of pathos. In "His Father's Mate", the first story he had published, he recounts an incident he had heard as a boy on the worked-out goldfield at Eurunderee. Then come two stories that depict the hardship and the heartbreak of city life in the 1880s and the 1890s. We meet Lawson the young apprentice, under the alias of Arvie Aspinall, learning his trade of coach painting in a hard school. How different this is from our own times, when Apprenticeship Week, as we call it, recognizes the human dignity of the young worker!

Then comes the story of Jack Gunther, the bushman going blind, living in one of those cheap doss-houses and eating in one of those greasy sixpenny restaurants that can exist only in poverty-ridden communities. What a contrast this provides with our own day, with its medical benefits and social services! Yet this is the road our people travelled, and thanks to Lawson and his like, we have ever

before us the picture of what can happen if we condone injustice or shirk our responsibility to our less fortunate fellow-citizens. These two stories offer a contrast between the life of the bush and that of the city in those days. "The Drover's Wife", in addition, lifts the veil to reveal the self-sacrificing lonely life of the bushwomen who in those days helped to lay the foundation of our prosperity.

Finally, in Part IV we have a story of high artistic quality and deep human sympathy, a story which expresses the love and pity Lawson felt for his fellow-man. In this there is nothing of the resentment he felt against those who would deny the underdog a place in the sun, but over it is the play of his humour, never more tenderly applied than here.

As all of these stories belong to the 1890s, so they bring back the atmosphere of that period of Australian aspiration, the period before motorcars, aeroplanes and radio when the Australian character was born, when the sense of unity among the Australian States was about to culminate in Federation and the birth of a nation. In 1925 David McKee Wright said truly of Lawson's place in Australian history: "He belonged to a past of struggle, pain and triumph, when the country was in the making. Others will use those days to give their work a background of colour and romance, but there can be none to walk where he walked, none to see with his eyes. . . . Reading Lawson, our children's children will hear the living voice of those who laid the foundations of all they prize and love."

Henry Lawson was the spokesman of all who suffer injustice. He cried out passionately for the welfare of Australia and its people. He was in the forefront of those who called for reform of whatever was useless and bad. He looked forward to a renewal of the Australian pioneering spirit in cultural enterprises. Above all, and this makes him always modern, he was the embodiment of

that critical spirit without which a nation stagnates and democracy decays.

III

The story of Henry Lawson's life really begins in 1838, twenty-nine years before he was born. In that year his great-grandfather John Albury, an English farm labourer of 42, and his wife Anne, with their four sons and four daughters, left England as bounty emigrants to New South Wales. One of the sons, Henry Albury, was 13 when the family arrived in Sydney in the emigrant ship *Woodbridge* towards the end of 1838. The family lived near Mulgoa, not far from Penrith, where Henry and his younger brother Abel worked in the bush and learnt to love the big timber. Here in 1845 Henry Albury married Harriet Winn, an English commercial traveller's daughter who had emigrated to Australia and was a servant in a local settler's house. Two years later, after their first child Emma was born, Henry and Harriet moved over the Blue Mountains to Guntawang, a station not far from Mudgee, where Henry worked as a bush carpenter.

Henry Albury was now a grown man with family responsibilities. He was a big handsome bushman, well over six feet, with dark eyes, black hair, and a Roman nose. Although he could not read or write, he had in him some of the qualities that go to make a poet, and in after years Henry Lawson spoke of him as a lover of the bush and all things in it—"a dumb poet of the trees".

Henry Albury's second daughter Louisa inherited these qualities. She was born in 1848 at Guntawang, and along with the rest of the family moved to Mudgee in the early 1850s. Henry Albury helped clear the streets of Mudgee, worked as a timbergetter, built fences, bridges and houses.

In 1863 two local farmers discovered gold at Golden Gully, just behind the site of the present-day Public School at Eurunderee, about four miles north of Mudgee. Within a week miners had pegged out Golden Gully and

had located colour in Sapling Gully near by. Within three weeks four hundred diggers had put down shafts, and soon there were hundreds of tents on the new goldfield, which was named New Pipeclay. The aboriginal name, Eurunderee, was restored when the Department of Education built the Public School in 1876.

Henry Albury decided to move to New Pipeclay, not to dig for gold, but to work as a bush carpenter and contractor. He did well and within a year had earned enough to buy a public house alongside the road in Sapling Gully, where his family conducted the rough-and-ready business.

To Sapling Gully, in 1865, came a Norwegian digger named Peter Larsen, who had left his ship at Melbourne thirteen years earlier at the age of 18 to dig for gold at Ballarat. He followed the gold rushes in Victoria and New South Wales and drifted north with the hundreds who came to try their luck at Pipeclay. He was a man of about middle height, sturdily built, with ruddy complexion, grey eyes, reddish hair and beard. By nature he was kind and gentle, sober, hard-working and clean-minded.

By now Henry Albury's daughter Louisa was nearly eighteen. She was tall and dark, strong-willed like her father, and very intelligent. Peter Larsen married her in Mudgee on 7th July 1866, and they set up house in a slab hut at Sapling Gully.

Two months later word of a rush to the Weddin Mountains, 180 miles to the south, came to Pipeclay. Peter and Louisa loaded up their belongings on a dray and set out for the new goldfield, soon to be known as the Grenfell goldfield. Here Henry Lawson was born during the night of 16th-17th June 1867. An obelisk marks the spot today, in the north-east corner of Lawson Park, a mile south of the business centre of Grenfell, where Lawson lived as a baby.

When his mother registered the birth of her baby at Forbes a few days later, she gave his name as Henry

Lawson and his father's as Peter Lawson. And from that time onward the Norwegian form of the name was not used.

The little family left Grenfell within a year and went back to Pipeclay (Eurunderee), where Peter Lawson joined forces with Henry Albury. Here Lawson grew up. From his grandfather he heard many tales of the rush to Golden Gully, among them that of Tommy Aspinall, which he was to convert into the compassionate story, "His Father's Mate".

By this time the diggings had petered out, and the diggers who remained began to take up selections. Peter Lawson selected two acres a short distance from Henry Albury's old slab-and-bark public house and built a solid hut for his family, now increased by the birth of Henry's brother Charles.

Then in 1870 came the rush to Gulgong, in which the Lawsons took part, Peter as a digger, Louisa as a dressmaker. The family did poorly, and Peter moved back to Sapling Gully, where he extended his selection to 200 acres and tried to make a farm. The effort was hopeless. The ground had been excavated by hundreds of diggers, so that the topsoil had disappeared under heaps of clay and soft rock.

Meanwhile the children were growing, and their education had to be considered. When a rush broke out in 1874 at Log Paddock, across the road from Sapling Gully, the diggers and selectors with families, led by Joseph Southwick, built a school about 2½ miles from Sapling Gully. Lawson began as a pupil in 1875, at the age of eight, but he was often absent, helping his father on the farm, fencing, filling in holes, milking. About this time the boy caught a severe cold, which left him slightly deaf. Today his deafness would be relieved early; but in that remote place and in those hard times, there was no chance of relief. It became worse as he grew up, and very early in life it affected his temperament; he was a lonely boy, and

deafness made him still more reserved. Not until it was too late was any serious attempt made to mend matters.

In 1876 a new slab-and-bark school was opened at Eurunderee, the teacher being an Irish ex-soldier, John Tierney, whom Lawson held in affectionate memory. The school was built on its present site, adjoining two acres where Joe Swallow, an English remittance man, had lived in his little stone hut. These two acres have since become part of the school playground.

The school was about half a mile from Lawson's home, and when it opened there were 45 children on the roll, including Mary Buchholtz, whose sister Bertha was the model for Bertha Buckolt in "'Buckolts' Gate'".

Two years later Peter Lawson won the contract to erect a new sawn-timber school in place of the old bark school, and Henry again became his father's mate. It was not until 1880 that school attendance became compulsory, but by then Lawson had left to help his father after a meagre schooling of less than four years.

Helping his father meant trying to make a farm out of the ruined ground in Sapling Gully. Peter used to go away working as a carpenter in Mudgee all day, then return at night after twelve hours of toil, to dig a dam in the moonlight, or burn out stumps, plant fruit trees, fill in shafts. The boy had no heart for the work, knowing instinctively that it was hopeless. Even today, nearly a hundred years later, Sapling Gully is uncultivated, and Peter Lawson's farm grows only grass to feed a few cattle. The house he built has gone, and all that remains is the brick fireplace, standing alongside a handsome timber and stone memorial shed in a few square yards dedicated to Henry Lawson.

Life at home was anything but attractive, and Lawson was glad to escape from it at the age of fourteen, to go further afield with his father. Peter began working in the Blue Mountains at that time, and after that the two worked together on the new railway line from Lithgow

through Wallerawang and Rylstone to Mudgee. Here, in the company of men like his father, he heard many stories that provided him with material for use in later life—such as "The Iron-bark Chip" and "Bill, the Ventriloquial Rooster".

Meanwhile Louisa, his mother, had decided to leave the selection and move to Sydney to give herself and the other three children a better life. She leased the selection in 1883 and went to live in the city.

Henry joined her there and set about learning a trade. He became an apprentice coach painter and travelled every morning from Redfern station, where all the trains started at that time, to Granville, where he was learning his trade with the firm of Hudson Brothers. From his experiences as an apprentice he drew the material for the story, "Two Boys at Grinder Bros", and he is Arvie Aspinall.

The family was desperately poor. Mother and children lived on Henry's meagre wage and on the money Peter earned: he kept only a few shillings for food and working clothes, and sent the rest to his wife. Henry realized how lacking he was in education, and he attended night classes in English and History. He was a hard-working lad, but shy and self-conscious. His deafness made him all the more sensitive, and the feeling that he had a destiny to fulfil terrified him.

At the age of 18 he went to Melbourne in an attempt to have his deafness cured. He stayed for a year, working at his trade, then came back to Sydney. He lived from hand to mouth, picking up a job when he could, half-starved, bitter and resentful. He was one of many who lived on the breadline, one of many who knew that something was wrong with the organization of society and who simmered with plans for revolution. He was only 20 when his bitter complaints broke through into revolutionary verse: he called his poem "Sons of the South" and sent it to J. F. Archibald of the *Bulletin*. Archibald printed it on 1st October 1887 as "A Song of the Republic". It was

Lawson's first published poem. He followed it the next year with another hymn of protest, "Faces in the Street", and the story, "His Father's Mate".

His father lived just long enough to see this story appear, and he used to show it proudly to his workmates at Mount Victoria. His mother, in this year, began a new and vigorous life as founder and editress of a women's paper, *The Dawn*, which was dedicated to securing a better deal for women in the community.

Unemployment in Sydney and consequent slackness in the building trade drove many men to other colonies, especially to Western Australia, where the discovery of gold brought work and hope. Lawson and his youngest brother went to Albany, where they worked at house-painting for a few months.

In 1890 he was back in Sydney, with little work offering. A bleak future faced the young man, and when he was offered a job as a journalist on the staff of the Brisbane *Boomerang* at £2 a week, he hastened to take it. His main work was to run a "Country Crumbs" column. For this he used to take items from the country newspapers and re-write them in rhyme. This gave Lawson plenty of practice rhyming, but it did not raise the circulation of the *Boomerang* to any noticeable extent. In the following year the *Boomerang* went out of existence, and Lawson was back in Sydney, living with his Aunt Emma at McMahon's Point, North Sydney, and picking up a guinea here and there for a story or a poem.

When his friend E. J. Brady told J. F. Archibald of Lawson's plight, Archibald gave Lawson £5 and a rail-way ticket to Bourke on the understanding that he was to write articles and stories on the outback for the *Bulletin*. Lawson describes the trip to Bourke in the sketch, "In A Dry Season".

At Bourke he picked up with Jim Grahame, a bush balladist who also wrote for the *Bulletin*, and the two swagged it from station to station looking for work.

Unfortunately, it was late in the year, the tail-end of the shearing season, and only a few straggling sheep were mustered for shearing: this experience comes out in "Stragglers". Then came a long tramp to Hungerford and back to Bourke at the height of a dry summer. Lawson never forgot this bitter experience, which coloured his whole outlook on the far west.

As soon as he could, he caught a train back to Sydney, describing his trip in the sketch, "In A Wet Season".

Work in Sydney was hard to get. The bad seasons and the depression of 1893 ruined many men, and people with a trade had to leave New South Wales to improve their lot. Lawson went to New Zealand, arriving towards the end of the year, "just in time to see the women get the vote".

He "got a little painting to do now and then, and a guinea from the *New Zealand Mail* for a rhyme called 'For'ard' ". After three months without work, he "went with a mate to a sawmill in the Hutt Valley". Out of this tramp came the story, "The Ghostly Door".

Three months later he "got on with a ganging lineman on a telegraph line in South Island". He worked hard, "in the depth of winter, camping out all the time, humping poles where the horses couldn't go". Then in June 1894, "there came a letter from the *Worker* people to say that a *Daily Worker* had been successfully floated", and that there was a place for him on it. He felt no great love for the Colony that he had had to leave to get a living, but like the Australian in "His Country—After All", he came back to Sydney, only to find that the *Daily Worker* had ceased publication while he was on the way home.

Nevertheless he wrote regularly for the *Worker*—the weekly paper—during 1894 and 1895 among the stories published in it at this time being the pathetic "Going Blind". In 1894 his mother brought out his first book, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, a little paper-covered

book containing several of his best pieces, among them "The Drover's Wife" and "The Mystery of Dave Regan".

His reputation as a writer was growing, and when a publisher agreed to bring out two books for him, one a collection of his short stories, the other a collection of his poems, he felt that at last he was on the way to living by his writing. In April 1896 he married Bertha Bredt, a young Victorian girl then living with her mother in Sydney, and went to Western Australia for material to write about as well as to follow his trade when necessary. While he was there, his two books appeared: they were the celebrated *While the Billy Boils* and *In the Days When the World Was Wide.*

In the following year Lawson and his wife came back to Sydney. In March 1897 they went to New Zealand. Lawson was appointed teacher of the little school in the Maori village of Mangamaunu, a wild and beautiful spot on the eastern coast of the South Island, flanked by the rugged snow-clad Kaikoura Mountains. Here he stayed until October 1897, and here some of his best poems and stories were written. Here, too, he made up his mind to go to England, believing that he would earn more there.

The Lawsons came back to Sydney a month later, and Lawson wrote steadily for the *Bulletin* and other papers. He collected material for three more books, *On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails*, both collections of stories, and *Verses Popular and Humorous.*

Then, early in 1900, David Scott Mitchell, whose great collection of Australian books was the beginning of the famous Mitchell Library, lent Lawson the money for the fares to England. He sailed away early in 1900 with high hopes. He had no trouble in having his work accepted, his first books being *Children of the Bush* and *The Country I Come From*, the latter containing the stories in *On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails*. After these came what some critics consider to be his best books, *Joe*