

Coolabah, No.13, 2014, ISSN 1988-5946, Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

*Travelling in Lawson's Tracks,
A Review-Essay*

Paul Eggert, *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson's While the Billy Boils*. Sydney University Press/Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013

Henry Lawson, *While the Billy Boils. The Original Newspaper Versions*, edited by Paul Eggert, explanatory notes by Elizabeth Webby. Sydney University Press, 2013.

John Barnes

Copyright©2014 John Barnes. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.

You were quick to pick on a faulty line
That I strove to put my soul in:
Your eyes were keen for a dash of mine
In the place of a semi-colon—
And blind to the rest. And is it for such
As you I must brook restriction?
'I was taught too little?' I learnt too much
To care for a pedant's diction.

Must I turn aside from my destined way
For a task your Joss would find me?
I come with the strength of the living day.
And with half the world behind me;
I leave you alone in your cultured halls
To drivel and croak and cavil:
Till your voice goes further than college walls,
Keep out of the tracks we travel!

Henry Lawson, 'The Uncultured Rhymer to his Cultured Critics' (1897)

The well-known lines quoted above are the last two stanzas of a poem that Henry Lawson directed at his friend, John Le Gay Brereton, a graduate of Sydney University who had made a critical comment about his prosody. The hostility that Lawson voices towards 'cultured critics' was certainly irrational and unjustified, but it was not a philistine reaction to learning. Throughout his life he 'longed for something better', and in his youth he had wanted 'higher education' and 'culture'. That Lawson aspired to be

a university student will probably come as a surprise to many who know his writing and think that they know the man who produced it. As a youth in Sydney, after working all day as a painter he went to evening classes, but twice failed to reach a high enough standard to matriculate. Lawson's creativity is more likely to have been stultified than stimulated by university studies, but this failure to realize what was probably an unrealistic ambition certainly made him extremely sensitive to criticism from someone who was regarded as better educated, even from a friend such as Brereton.

The lifelong friendship of the two men began in 1894 when Brereton was an undergraduate at Sydney University; and it was in an article, 'Poetry in Australia', in the undergraduate magazine *Hermes* that he hailed the writer, not yet published in book form, as a poet 'who has within him the elements of greatness'. Brereton never followed up this early enthusiastic notice—the first appreciation of Lawson's writing to appear in print—with reviews or essays. He was to reminisce in later years about Lawson as the 'mate with whom I knocked around', but he did not think of his writing as a subject for academic study. Nor did any other Australian academics until about the middle of the twentieth century, when universities started to include Australian authors in their courses.

In 1922 Lawson, widely acclaimed as Australia's National Writer, died in poverty. The previous year Brereton, after working for some years as a librarian, was appointed to the Chair of English Literature at Sydney University on the strength of his studies in Elizabethan drama. His reputation as a scholar was established abroad by his editing of *Lust's Dominion; or the Lascivious Queen*, an anonymous Elizabethan play now thought to have been written mainly by Thomas Dekker. Apart from his scholarly productions Brereton tried his hand at poetry and prose, but it is probably safe to say that of all his published work it is what he wrote about Henry Lawson that is now most read. In 1931, with Lawson's daughter, Bertha, he edited a volume of reminiscences entitled *Henry Lawson By His Mates*. In his own affectionate recollection of his friend he wrote that 'mateship became the lonely poet's watchword, and he made it the watchword of Australia'. That was the dominant note of the book, which promoted the interpretation of Lawson as 'the poet of mateship', an interpretation that went largely uncontested until a generation later Australian critics, mostly academics, began to pay sustained attention to his work, and serious critical discussion replaced tributes and rhetorical gestures.

By 1960 Sydney academic H. P. Heseltine, the author of a monograph on Brereton, could write that Lawson was 'the most monumentalized, the most memorialized, and the most popularly celebrated of our writers'. His essay, 'Saint Henry—Our Apostle of Mateship', arguing that the legend of Lawson was false to 'his actual achievement in fiction', pointed to the direction that criticism was taking. Although Lawson's verse still had admirers, and was popular with a large reading public, critics generally began to concentrate on his short stories. The 1948 essay by the influential Melbourne literary critic, A. A. Phillips, which was reprinted in several collections over the years, had memorably argued the case for Lawson as a prose craftsman. Two years later New Zealand-born Canberra academic Murray Todd (whose essay was also reprinted in several places) had declared that Lawson's stories were 'his great achievement', and that he was 'a great artist'.

A generation like mine that had grown up knowing Lawson through stories such as 'The Drover's Wife' and 'The Loaded Dog' and ballads such as 'Andy's Gone with Cattle', which appeared in primary school readers, now started to look closely at his fiction. An increasing number of prose selections were published for use by students in senior school and college. The establishment of a Chair of Australian Literature at Sydney University, and the proliferation of courses as English Departments found room for Australian literature among their offerings, saw Lawson firmly established as an academic subject. By the time that the copyright expired on Lawson's published writing in 1972, his fiction had become the focus of critical debate among academics, and Colin Roderick (publisher-cum-university professor) had produced seven volumes, collecting Lawson's verse prose and letters, and criticism of his work in what he called a Memorial Edition. The books on the university library shelves—in Australia, at least—testified that Lawson had, in one sense, been accepted into the academy.

The critical and biographical studies over the forty years since then have revealed a much more complex figure than the simple, warm-hearted 'poet of mateship' of popular legend; but there are still important aspects of Lawson's life and writing that are not well documented or understood. Such has been the mythologizing about the literary activity in Sydney at the end of the nineteenth century that it has been difficult to get a clear perspective on Lawson as a writer in his times. As well, confusion and glossing over of events in the accounts given of him by his contemporaries, along with the sometimes deliberate suppression of facts, has led to misconceptions about his life and misreadings of his work. Even Colin Roderick's *Henry Lawson: A Life* (1991), the most substantial biographical account that has been published, leaves one feeling that the tragedy of this gifted writer is still to be written.

Roderick devoted many years of his life to researching and editing Lawson's work. The volumes he produced, while undoubtedly valuable, did have shortcomings, which have become more evident with the passing of time. My own research into Lawson's stay in England was prompted by the discovery that Roderick's *Henry Lawson: Letters* did not include Lawson's letters to the three most important literary figures in that period of his life: publisher William Blackwood; literary agent James B. Pinker; and publisher's reader and critic Edward Garnett. In editing the verse Roderick arranged the texts chronologically, according to the date of composition, as far as he was able to establish it, with textual variants at the foot of each page, and notes gathered at the end of each of the three volumes. The notes were uneven and idiosyncratic, like all Roderick's comments, but generally helpful, and the organization was, one might say, 'user-friendly'. The two volumes of 'collected prose'—*Short Stories and Sketches 1888-1922* and *Autobiographical and Other Writings 1887-1922*--that Roderick included in his Memorial Edition had no notes, but a third volume of commentary was foreshadowed.

Henry Lawson: Commentaries on his Prose Writings did not appear until 1985. In the two volumes of 'collected prose' Roderick had grouped the contents according to his own interpretation of Lawson's subject matter. The commentaries on the fiction followed the organization of a revised (1984) edition of Volume 1 of the *Collected Prose*. (Ignoring his own division of Lawson's prose into 'stories and

sketches' and 'autobiographical and other writings', Roderick transferred Lawson's *Bulletin* article, "Pursuing Literature" in Australia', to the new edition of the fiction.) In annotating Lawson's fiction Roderick usefully notes textual variants, explains allusions and historical detail, and points to the changes that significantly alter a story; but the commentaries suffer from being too discursive and unfocused. His attitude is fairly indicated by his claim in the Introduction that in his commentaries he provided 'chapter and verse for the finding, that essentially Lawson was a student of the human mind'. Roderick has a great deal to say about Lawson's personality and includes long quotations from Lawson's contemporaries; such material has an incidental interest but a more disciplined approach to the task of annotation would probably have produced a work of more value to readers of Lawson's stories.

In recent years there have been many selections of Lawson's work, some with modest notes, but until this edition of *While the Billy Boils*, edited by Paul Eggert, with explanatory notes by Elizabeth Webby, there has been nothing comparable with Roderick's work. This new volume is the most sustained piece of scholarly editing of Lawson that has been attempted. Having known Paul Eggert since the beginning of his academic career, I am not surprised that the work has been done so meticulously. (Once when I was in New York he asked me to check a D. H. Lawrence manuscript for him, as he was not completely sure that the dot on the microfilm was a punctuation mark.) I have never seen John Le Gay Brereton's edition of *Lust's Dominion*, but he could not have worked more closely over his text than Paul Eggert has done over the text of Brereton's 'uncultured' friend. It is an exemplary piece of academic work.

In Roderick's *Commentaries* the records of 'textual variance' were, as Eggert says, 'incomplete and unsystematic'. In his edition of *While the Billy Boils* Eggert rejects Roderick's old-fashioned editorial practice of printing as the reading text 'the last-authorized version within Lawson's lifetime', which had meant that the text given to the reader incorporated, 'as well as Lawson's own revisions, all of the changes brought about by editors and typesetters that he had either not noticed or felt unable to oppose' [p. xviii]. By contrast, Eggert prints the earliest known version, noting what he calls 'textual accretions' at the foot of the page. Although it is the book version that has been read and discussed for over a hundred years, one can see the logic of this from the point of view of the editor interested in the history of the text.

Strictly speaking, what Eggert's volume offers as a reading text is not *While the Billy Boils* but the stories out of which the book was fashioned. In most instances the changes, which are all scrupulously listed at the foot of the page, are not of major consequence; but where passages have been rewritten, deleted or added the reader has to struggle through a mass of minutiae and symbols (indicating who may have made the changes) in order to reconstruct the text that was published in the first edition of the book.

While the Billy Boils is an uneven collection and is obviously the work of a young writer still finding his way. The additions and deletions in several stories are very interesting—more interesting to me than the details of the copy-editing which

preoccupy Eggert. There are two stories where one can see Lawson hesitating between possible narratives. 'Rats', as originally published in the *Bulletin*, is a story of an old man who appears to be 'barmy'; when it was republished in Lawson's first collection, *Short Stories in Prose and Verse*, Lawson added a paragraph, which revealed that the old man was merely pretending. When *While the Billy Boils* was being prepared for publication, Lawson struck out the added paragraph, so that the story reverted to being a portrait of a bush eccentric (like 'The Bush Undertaker') rather than an account of a trick played by a shrewd bushman. As originally published in a New Zealand paper, 'That There Dog o' Mine'. An Australian Sketch' describes how an injured shearer refuses to enter hospital because he is told that his faithful dog, which has a broken leg, must be sent away; he collapses, and when he recovers consciousness, 'comfortably fixed up' on a hospital bed, he is told that the doctor is out in the hospital yard tending to the dog. In *While the Billy Boils* that is where the story ends; but in the original version the narrative continues: 'The above story is true—all except the last paragraph'. The hospital does not allow the dog to stay, the injured man goes away; his body is found a week later, guarded by the dog, which is shot by the police. The ending of the story is a savage rejection of the sentimentalizing of bush life:

There was a lot of sentiment about the faithfulness of the dog, and a howl of indignation against the cruelty of the police.

The sentiment and indignation spilled over and got into the local papers, and thence into most of their contemporaries....But the dog was—well—it was eating the corpse.

This deleted ending is especially fascinating, indicating as it does the potential for a darker, tougher representation of bush life than Lawson developed. The different approaches of Roderick and Eggert are strikingly apparent in their handling of this major change to the story. Roderick describes the deletion of the original ending as 'a compromise to the spirit of the age', and forthrightly judges it to be 'disastrous'. Eggert's commentary is strictly confined to describing the state of the manuscript: 'On MS, HL hesitated over the ending, crossing it out in pencil and writing "?HL" in the margin, and then confirming by crossing it out in red ink. There is no reply from AJ [Arthur Jose] on MS, presumably he agreed'.

Again, the two editors follow different principles in dealing with additions to the original printed versions. Eggert's privileging of the first published version over all others means that there are no explanatory notes for what was added later. As a result significant alterations, which are sometimes very small but no less significant for that, go unremarked. To take an example: 'The Union Buries Its Dead' originally ended:

I did hear lately what his real name was, but if I do chance to read the real name among the missing friends in some agony column I shall not be aware of it, and therefore not be able to give any information, for I have already forgotten the name.

In *While the Billy Boils* it appears in a subtly altered form:

We did hear, later on, what his real name was; but, if we ever chance to read it in the 'Missing Friends Column,' we shall not be able to give any information to heart-broken Mother or Sister or Wife, nor to anyone who could let him hear something to his advantage—for we have already forgotten the name.

The changes, including the switch from the singular to the plural which emphasizes the dead man's isolation, have the effect of intensifying the emotional impact of the sketch. Roderick quotes the two print versions and one in proof, commenting on the qualities of the writing, but sees no need for explanatory notes on the paragraph. Eggert's method provides for the annotation of the phrase, 'agony column' (which does not appear in *While the Billy Boils*) but not for any explanation of the added phrase—'hear something to his advantage' (the irony of which is probably lost on many, especially younger, readers who have never read the lawyers' advertisements in newspapers). Roderick remarks that 'Lawson sweated over this ending; and certainly the rephrasing suggests an author seeking for a precise emotional effect. 'The sketch', Lawson once wrote, 'to be really good, must be good in every line'; and this instance his revisions shows him striving after that ideal.

The same may be said of Lawson's editing of 'Hungerford', another sketch based on his outback experience and one that is far removed from the conventional notion of him as a simple bush story-teller. In his essay, 'The Craftsmanship of Lawson', Arthur Phillips writes of Lawson having 'to learn how to be successfully "slight", to find just how little plot he could afford to use without risking the collapse of the structure'. That is exactly what is to be seen in 'Hungerford'. The 'plot' is the arrival of two swagmen at Hungerford, a settlement divided by 'an interprovincial rabbit-proof fence—with rabbits on both sides of it', which marks the boundary between two colonies; they camp one night there, and apart from their encounter with an old shepherd, nothing really happens. The whole point of the sketch is the narrator's appalled reaction to the place. Roderick notes that Lawson's 'mockery' is 'intense', but his commentary is rather hit and miss. He does, however, provide an explanation of an allusion which, I confess, puzzled me for a long time. When preparing the story for *While the Billy Boils*, Lawson added a sardonic paragraph about the rabbits, beginning: 'This fence is a standing joke with Australian rabbits—about the only joke they have out there, except the memory of Pasteur and poison and inoculation.' Until I read Roderick's commentary I did not realize how topical and local the allusion to Pasteur was. By 1889 the rabbit plague was so serious, control methods such as the 'rabbit-proof fence' having failed, that the New South Wales Government offered a substantial prize for a biological method of exterminating them. Pasteur, who believed that he had identified a virus that would kill rabbits, sent a team headed by his nephew to conduct tests in Sydney, but the Rabbit Commission refused him the reward, and the vaccine was not adopted. Pasteur died in September 1895, shortly before Lawson and Jose began preparing 'Hungerford' (originally published in 1893) and other stories for what became *While the Billy Boils*, and about the same time there were further trials of the virus in Queensland.

Eggert's method precludes any notice of this Pasteur allusion, but in his Introduction to the volume he refers to the added passage as 'tonally distinct from the broad anecdotal comedy of the early version' [p. xliii]. I think this misses the way in which the added text strengthens the sardonic humour pervading the whole work. As I see it, the changes that Lawson made in this story, as in 'The Union Buries Its Dead', intensify the feeling created in the narrative, and suggest a writer whose insight into his own work has developed between the two versions.

'Hungerford' is the sort of work where explanatory notes can be of most help to the reader. Throughout this volume one is grateful for Elizabeth Webby's solidly factual notes, but 'Hungerford' is a sketch in which a little more attention to what Roderick calls 'cultural references' would have been worthwhile. Today's readers probably miss the literary echoes in 'distant prospect' and the 'blasted, barren wilderness that doesn't even howl' (neither of which Webby annotates) but don't need a gloss on 'recording angel' (for which Webby, surprisingly, finds it necessary to quote Sterne). Also, Lawson's use of the Cretan paradox would have been worth a comment. As for Clancy, Webby provides a reference to the Lawson-Paterson exchange in the *Bulletin*, but could have said more about Lawson's reaction to 'ideal bush literature', directing the reader to such Lawson items as 'Some Popular Australian Mistakes' 'The Bush and the Ideal'. A note on the responses in the *Bulletin* to Paterson's 'Clancy of the Overflow' would have highlighted the significance of Lawson's use of the name.

This edition encourages one to read the text closely, an approach that is critically rewarding, as so much of the power of *While the Billy Boils* lies in the management of small effects. It also prompts reflection on Lawson's development as a prose writer. The extraordinary creative stimulus of his experience of the 'outback' is most clearly apparent when one reads the stories in the order of publication. Inevitably one is led to consider whether the editing (and revisions, such as those I have just mentioned) of the stories for book publication strengthened or weakened them. Eggert regards the 'aesthetic question' of whether authorial additions to stories are improvements as 'editorially irrelevant'—and, of course, the same applies to authorial deletions. His concern is the copy-editing, which he examines minutely. Although he says that Lawson and Jose worked 'collaboratively and closely' [p. xxxvi], his account of the collaboration leaves the impression that it was an unequal relationship. Roderick represents Jose as, on the whole, a negative influence; but more recently, in a contribution to Ken Stewart's anthology, *The 1890s*, Teresa Pagliaro, who has made a special study of Jose, has described his editing as 'conservative and non-interventionist and marked by a wish to favour the author's intentions'. The desire of both publisher and author to succeed in the English as well as the small Australian market was clearly an important concern. In his Introduction Paul Eggert, having summarised Jose's corrections as imposing a form of 'book decorum', sees more loss than profit in the editing. Having looked at and recorded every change, he concludes: 'A myriad tiny touches of tonal subtlety were lost' (p. xxxv).

The editing of *While the Billy Boils* is described exhaustively in the volume accompanying the edition, which is entitled *Biography of a Book*. (It appears to be the fashion for the word 'biography' to be appropriated for all sorts of books where

'history' would probably have been used in the past. In a recent list of academic remainders *The Qu'ran: A Biography* was cheek by jowl with *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*.) Eggert makes it clear in his preface that he sees himself as offering a model of how to apply 'book-historical methodologies'. He has been drawn to Lawson's work because it provides 'a particularly demanding case—but quite fascinatingly so' (p. x). His ambitions are large, extremely large, as he explains in his Introduction: 'Some surprising reversals of the accepted wisdom occur, but it is the way of proceeding and the way of conceptualising the method that gives the book its broader relevance' (p. 3). Nevertheless, I think most readers of the book will, like me, be more interested in what he says about Lawson rather than in the abstruse argument about literary study. He gives a blow-by-blow description of how *While the Billy Boils* was prepared for publication and marketed, and how it was received. The account of the making of a book can be fascinating, but in the amassing of information it is all too easy to lose a sense of what is important. The amount of detail given here is testimony to Eggert's dedication to the task of giving a full and accurate presentation, and book historians (book biographers!) will undoubtedly relish every fact, no matter how trivial it may seem to the rest of us.

Given Lawson's touchiness about his lack of education, one is especially keen to gain an insight into his relationship with Jose. Eggert is narrowly and intensely focused on documentation, and his account does not give much sense of the interaction of the two personalities. There is one little moment, however, when the text comes alive. It is an exchange several years after *While the Billy Boils*, when Jose was involved in a revision of Lawson's first book of verse, *In the Days When the World was Wide*. Jose asks Lawson why 'moustache' is misspelt as 'mustarsh', and Lawson replies: 'I dunno HL' [p. 92]. Lawson was far from being the only author whose spelling was uncertain—think of W. B. Yeats—and Eggert quotes this as an example of Lawson's remaining attached to his idiosyncratic spellings: I am inclined to treasure it as an example of Lawson's sense of humour, and his comfortable relationship with Jose. It is, perhaps, also a salutary reminder that the intentions of an author, especially one conscious of the formal limits of his education, may not always be steady and certain.

Although the blurb on Eggert's book asserts that the 'the feel and nature of Lawson's writing' were changed by the editing, design and production of *While the Billy Boils*, I don't think that he explicitly makes such a bold claim anywhere in his text, nor do I think that that his painstaking work leads to such a conclusion. He does go so far as to write: 'At best, the revision of the stories, their number and sequence seem to have been the outcome of a number of pressures of which Lawson was only in partial control' [p.145]. Eggert wants to emphasize the significance of book production on what we read as 'the author's work', but what does this amount to? Was the collaboration/conflict between Jose and Lawson during the editing of *While the Billy Boils* out of the ordinary? After all, many writers have tales to tell of the failings of their editors: is this a special case? How does Lawson's experience of Jose as editor compare with that of his contemporaries? Teresa Pagliaro lists Brunton Stephens, Farrell, Paterson, Dyson and Daley, whose work Jose edited for Angus and Robertson in the 1890s, and says that their reactions were mainly favourable. Some comparison of what happened

with the other authors would possibly have provided a perspective on the relationship of Jose and Lawson. One major claim that can most certainly be made for Jose is that he provided an excellent title for Lawson's volume of stories. The inviting, evocative phrase, 'while the billy boils', must have helped to define Lawson in the public mind as the master of the 'bush yarn'.

In his *City Bushman* Christopher Lee explores the tension between the academic approaches to Lawson and the popular response, pointing out that the 'liberal nationalists' as he calls them (Palmer and Phillips fit the bill) were able to acclaim Lawson as an artist, while affirming his 'social importance'. Phillips makes the point effectively when he writes: 'What Lawson said, thousands of his contemporaries knew or felt to be the truth'. Reviews of *While the Billy Boils*, reveal the extraordinary phenomenon of Lawson's popularity before the collection was published. Eggert quotes a reviewer in a New Zealand paper who writes that Lawson's name is 'becoming a household word throughout Australasia. He has touched our hearts through the pages of the Sydney Bulletin, the Brisbane Boomerang, and many another paper, north, south, east, and west'. In the light of this sort of evidence, one would expect much more than Eggert offers on the way in which Lawson's reputation was established through periodical publication. It is a really serious weakness of this study that it does not include a fuller account of the *Bulletin* and its influence—at the very least, some discussion of the range and extent of its circulation was needed. Eggert has examined closely the texts of stories that appeared there, but he does not appear to have a close knowledge of the context in which they were published. In the pages of *The Bulletin* there was a continuing conversation among the writers, of which the much-quoted 'controversy in verse' between Lawson and Paterson is only one example.

Lawson does not seem to have touched the heart of Paul Eggert, though he traces his biography up to 1902. In an elaborate chronology in *Biography of a Book* we can discover such facts about the production of *While the Billy Boils* as: '18 May 1896 Payment for title page 'Vignette' by Frank Mahony', but of the crisis in Lawson's life, when he attempted suicide, the only reference in the whole book is the entry in the chronology: 'December 1902 Period in Sydney hospital'. Eggert is more concerned with what happened to Lawson's books than with what happened to the man himself. He may be justified in passing over the last twenty years of Lawson's life; but it could be argued that the years of sad decline, when Lawson nevertheless retained a hold on the affections of the public, need to be taken into account in tracing the 'afterlife' of *While the Billy Boils*, to which a whole chapter is devoted.

As for what Eggert has to say about Lawson as a writer, I found some of pronouncements hard to accept. For instance, in the Introduction to *While the Billy Boils* [p. xx] he makes Lawson sound like a travel writer: 'In writing of the outback he was, in effect, a cultural traveller but one who had the flexibility to go native and the intelligence to write about the life he found, especially that of the men, sympathetically even plangently, but also critically and comically'. It is an extraordinary notion that in getting involved with union politics and journalism at Bourke, and in working as a housepainter and as a rouseabout in a shearing shed Lawson was 'going native'. More than that, the implication that Lawson is detached

from his subject matter is completely at odds with my understanding of the man and his work. I think that New Zealand writer Frank Sargeson got it right when he wrote nearly half a century ago that Lawson 'looked at the desolation of the Australian inland, and he saw his own interior desolation'. Eggert starts with the assumption that *While the Billy Boils* is 'an Australian literary classic', but it is not clear to me what this might mean to him. This comment in *Biography of a Book* after Lawson returned from London hardly suggests work of classical status: 'His best days as a writer of tonally balanced, democratically conditioned and finely perceptive short fiction were over' [p. 248]. Perhaps this is preferable to the rather empty rhetoric that Brereton and so many others indulged in; and perhaps in feeling dissatisfied at this summation of Lawson's achievement I may be revealing how 'un-academic' my own feeling about Lawson is.

In writing about the cultural scene Eggert is confident, but not always convincing. A deeper knowledge of the period would have saved him from such gaffes as his calling Walter Murdoch's 1899 praise of Lawson 'a patrician Melbourne comment about a Sydney phenomenon' and his labelling Arthur Phillips 'a headmaster'. As a minor participant in the critical debate on Lawson from the late 1970s, I find his account of the later Lawson criticism tendentious, to say the least. And I have a bone to pick over one of his most confident assertions. At the opening of his final chapter, where he is intent upon pointing out a 'future direction for literary study', he refers to 'the Lawson prose drought of the later 1990s', suggesting that the short stories had less 'literary' appeal 'during that late postmodern period, with its conscious internationalising of taste' [p. 312]. By way of documentation he lists in an appendix post World War II publications of *While the Billy Boils*, Lawson prose selections, and multiple author anthologies containing stories from *While the Billy Boils*. This claim is based on publication dates: between 1992 and 2001 there were no new selections of Lawson's stories. As a good book historian Eggert should know that the dates do not tell the whole story. Here I may be guilty of self-indulgence—no new thing for a reviewer. In 1986 the *Penguin Henry Lawson: Short Stories*, which I edited, was published. In 2009 a second edition was published, with a new cover and a second introduction (by John Kinsella, not John Tranter, as Eggert records) added, and it was included in the Penguin Classics series. Eggert refers to this as 'Second Printing', which gives a false impression. The book had been reprinted many times—almost every year, I seem to recall, and sometimes more than once—and by the time of the second edition the total sales were over 80,000 copies, thanks to its use in schools and colleges in Australia and abroad. I do not know the sales figures for other volumes of Lawson's prose that were available at the same time, but I doubt that there is any basis for the claim of a 'Lawson prose drought'. What is striking about the lists in Appendix 3 is the number of publications.

Sales of Lawson were probably greatest through the 1980s and 1990s, by which time he was firmly established as a fit subject for academic study. Following on the work of Roderick, younger university teachers like Brian Matthews and Brian Kiernan were making the running. (Incidentally, I was surprised to read on page 322 that in 1982 Kiernan, whom I have always found to be open-minded, 'emerged from the New Critical-cum-Leavisite mindset that had been holding so many of his generation captive'. Given what has happened in literary criticism over the past

half-century, one would not expect to find so much anxiety on Eggert's part about American New Criticism and what he calls 'Leavisism', two approaches of last century which he tends to treat as being the one and same.) Over the past thirty years or so research, mainly by academics such as Kiernan, has brought to light previously unknown items of Lawson's writing and filled in gaps in his biography; and that work has informed and helped to clarify critical readings of Lawson's texts. As we approach the centenary of Lawson's death, interest in him is likely to quicken, and we can expect more academic studies of various kinds. Like Paul Eggert I think that book history can contribute to our understanding of a writer—the most striking example is how the prevailing view of Lawson's development was overturned when it was established that the Joe Wilson stories were written after Lawson arrived in England and not before—but the need is always to determine what is relevant and how it is relevant.

In *Biography of a Book* Eggert claims that his work offers 'a model for literary studies', and reassures us that his 'manifesto' is 'a modest one'; and that there is 'no note of triumph on offer' [p. 3]. However, for all his conviction that more book history can lead to 'a new literary criticism of Lawson', Eggert can hardly be said to demonstrate 'a new appreciation of Lawson's writing', as the blurb writer asserts. It seems to me that Eggert himself concedes a great deal when he writes: 'My hope is that we will be able to find conceptual room for the aesthetic so that book history can revive and refresh literary study and not just act as another escape route for lecturers in English or other literatures' [p. 353]. His real achievement is in his editing of the stories in *While the Billy Boils* and his detailed account in *Biography of a Book* of how Lawson's book was produced and marketed. He has gone over ground much of which was previously traversed by Colin Roderick, and although what he has done does not wholly supersede Roderick's work, he has provided full and accurate documentation—for which future literary critics will be truly grateful. Lawson, one is inclined to say, could not have objected to this traveller in his tracks.

As for this example of book production by Sydney University Press, my judgement is that the volumes are well designed, with attractive print. Both carry as a frontispiece of what purports to be a sketch of Lawson, but it would not surprise me to learn that it is mislabelled. In *Biography of a Book* I would gladly have sacrificed many of the elaborate and extensive footnotes for a bibliography.

John Barnes, MA (Melb), MA (Cantab) is Emeritus Professor of English at La Trobe University where he taught for many years before his retirement in 1996. His speciality is Australian literature, on which he has published both articles and books.