

***Mrs L, a work of literary journalism, and exegesis:
The poetics of literary journalism and illuminating
absent voices in memoir and biography.***

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Statement of Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This thesis has been prepared in accordance with Human Ethics Approval, University of Sydney:
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The final thesis has been proofed and formatted by a professional editor, Stephanie Walters.

Finally, as this thesis still is a memoir in part, I wish to acknowledge that a memoir is not just your memories. I thank my family and friends who graciously contributed their stories to the thesis, allowed me to write memories I share with them, and patiently listened while I wondered aloud about a long ago poet and his single parent wife.

Prior Publication

The following submission of the literary journalism component of this Doctor of Arts thesis, *Mrs L*, is an early manuscript of the professionally edited book version, published as *A Wife's Heart* by University of Queensland Press on April 3, 2017.

The majority of the exegesis chapter "Revisionist Biography and Absent Voices" was published in *Writing the Ghost Train: Rewriting, Remaking, Rediscovering Papers* – The Refereed Proceedings Of The 20th Conference Of The Australasian Association Of Writing Programs, 2015, Melbourne:

<http://www.aawp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Davies-1.pdf>

Abstract

Was Henry Lawson's decline into alcoholism, poverty and an early death really caused by his wife, Bertha Lawson? The biographers of the iconic bush poet and writer – most notably Denton Prout (1963), Manning Clark (1978) and Colin Roderick (1991) – have all constructed a victim as hero narrative around Lawson's life, blaming Bertha Lawson (nee Bredt) for his personal and creative decline.

With these biographies in mind, the thesis *Mrs L* is a work of literary journalism that is an alternative reading of Bertha Lawson as a single parent with two young children and a limited ability within the mores of the time to provide for her family. *Mrs L* repositions Bertha within a post separation and divorce single motherhood discourse that was emerging alongside suffragette narratives in Australia at the turn of the 20th century. In doing so, it illuminates her voice, one that has been absent in previous biographies of Henry Lawson.

Mrs L further intertwines a contemporary memoir of single parenting that reflects upon the historic narrative to conclude that there remain many similarities in the experience of separation and divorce for women despite considerable changes in law across the century.

The accompanying exegesis reflects upon the thesis *Mrs L* as a hybrid text of biography and memoir described by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) as the auto / biography or a / b genre. The exegesis explores the distinctions and relationships between literary journalism, memoir and biography, and suggests literary journalism as a poetics methodology (Lasky, 2013; Sims, 1995, 2012) for writing a / b texts such as *Mrs L*. Additionally, the exegesis posits that an epistolary strategy can replace the literary journalism technique of immersion in historical works such as *Mrs L* and the collective biography (Caine, 2010) *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* (Wright, 2013).

Responding to a recent critique by David Marr (2016-2017) of the use of first person in biographies, the exegesis further considers the role of the cultural self in memoir (Grant, 2016; Larson, 2007), its place in the a / b genre, and how the "biography as corrective" (Hamilton, 2016, p. 15) is encouraging revisionist as well as innovative explorations of biographical subjects whose voices have been negated in the past.

Keywords: Henry Lawson, Bertha Lawson, biography, memoir, revisionist

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“I did not realise then the restlessness which always filled Harry’s heart and soul, a state which was entirely due to the blood that ran in his veins – wanderer’s blood”.

Bertha Lawson, 1943¹

¹ Bertha Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*. (Sydney: Frank Johnson, 1943).

IN THE SUPREME COURT
of New South Wales
Matrimonial Causes Jurisdiction

In re HENRY LAWSON of Manly in the State of New South Wales Author and Journalist
And BERTHA MARIE LOUISA LAWSON, (formerly BERTHA MARIE LOUISA BREDT.
Spinster) his wife.²

On this third day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and
three, BERTHA MARIE LOUISA LAWSON, wife of HENRY LAWSON of Manly in the State
of New South Wales Author and Journalist being duly sworn maketh oath and saith
as follows.

1. I was on the fifteenth day of April A.D. One thousand eighth [sic] hundred and
ninety six, lawfully married to Henry Lawson at Sydney in New South Wales according
to the rites of the Church of England.

2. I was born at Bairnsdale in the State of Victoria and am at the present, that is to
say, at the date of the institution of this suit, and have for three years and upwards
been domiciled in New South Wales. My husband I was informed by him and believe
was born at Grenfell in the State of New South Wales and is at the present time that
is to say at the date of the institution of this suit and has been for three years and
upwards been domiciled in New South Wales.

3. I and my said husband have had issue of our said marriage two children to wit
JOSEPH HENRY LAWSON aged five years and one month and BERTHA MARIE LOUISA
LAWSON, aged three years and one month.

4. My husband has during three years and upwards been a habitual drunkard and
habitually been guilty of cruelty towards me.[sic]

5. My husband has been guilty of cruelty towards me.

6. The cruelty alleged in paragraphs four and five of this. My affidavit consists of the
acts and matters following. That my husband during the last three years struck me
in the face and about the body and blacked my eye and hit me with a bottle and
attempted to stab me and pulled me out of bed when I was ill and purposely made
a noise in my room when I was ill and pulled my hair and repeatedly used abusive
language and insulting language to me and was guilty of divers [sic] other acts of
cruelty to me whereby my health and safety are endangered.

Bertha Marie Louisa Lawson [handwritten signature]

Sworn by the Deponent on the day and year first before written before me. At Sydney
[signature unclear]

A Commissioner for the Affidavits

April 3rd, 1903

² Bertha's full name was in fact Bertha Marie Louise Lawson but the affidavit has 'Louisa' throughout.

1.

Undated letter to Bertha Lawson from Henry Lawson, c. 1903:³

Girlie,

Do try to forgive and forget. My heart is breaking and I can't live without you. Remember I was ill, very ill, and not responsible for what I said. It was all my fault. If I make you suffer, think how I have suffered. I have not touched a drink and am working hard. Don't think I'm a coward and afraid of the money. I have paid it and making plenty. Dearie I love you with all my heart and soul and will never say an unkind word to you again. Don't listen to friends and neighbours – listen to me.

I will bury the past if you can. Come to me tonight and save me. You don't know what I'm asking you to save me from. Let us have one more try at happiness. If I did not love you so much I might not have taken notice of little things. If you can't come, at least let little Bertha come to me 'till Monday. Don't let pride stand in your way.

Remember the happy days we had once. Only think of me as the man I was and will be again. Don't be influenced by two-faced mischief makers but come to your unhappy husband.

Forgive me and come to me and we'll be happy in spite of it all.

Harry (I'll write very hard until midnight).

A storm is building, about to crack. There's not much time to get to the pool. I walk through the city, feeling the pressure.

I look down the road to the Supreme Court of New South Wales, where once divorce court hearings adjudicated on separating couples. I think of Bertha Lawson in 1903, drafting her affidavit, asking the court for a judicial separation from her poet, Henry. Inviting a scandal.

I walk through the grounds of Sydney Hospital, and into The Domain. The grass is wet; boys playing soccer slip and kick. I walk faster, conscious of the coming storm. I think of the last few weeks. Jobs have fallen through; phone calls from bill companies are insistent. Christmas on the beach was a brief reprieve. I'm consumed with worry, with responsibility; with the fear that maybe I can't do this much longer.

I walk past the Art Gallery of New South Wales, along the harbour path leading to the pool. Further down the path is Mrs Macquarie's Chair, where Henry Lawson – another artist at work – and Bertha took their first stroll together in 1896. I glance at the commemorative statue of Henry, wearing bush clothes with a mate and a dog, bronzed beneath a gum tree.

Henry, Henry, Henry...he was a gypsy. Bertha must have had a weakness for them too. In a poem to his son, *To Jim*,⁴ Henry included the lines:

A wanderer and a gipsy [sic] wild
I've learnt the world and know,
For I was such another child –
Ah, many years ago!
You are a child of field and flood,
But with gipsy [sic] strains
A strong Norwegian sailor's blood
Is running through your veins.

Bertha's mistake was to challenge the blood, to try to stop its natural flow; others would say, as they did to me, that the first mistake was to marry it.

³ Henry Lawson. Letter to Bertha Lawson, n.d. Lawson Family Papers 1896-1968 MLMSS 7692 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

⁴ Henry Lawson, 'To Jim,' in *The Bulletin*, 9 March 1905, 3.

I feel the rain.

* * *

I collect gypsies. On Christmas Day they make contact one by one. Nomadic friends moored in Cairns on their catamaran call, and invite my 13-year-old daughter, Ruby, to visit in the new year. A former lover, who's a travel writer, texts from France. On Facebook, my daughter's father, Daniel, posts from L.A airport – a jazz pianist, he is a five-star gypsy, working on luxury cruise ships that take him a hemisphere away. When Ruby was little, she tried to follow him on a world map on her wall until it was a mass of scribbles curling at the corners, like our marriage.

We'd spent the days leading up to Christmas with Ruby's aunt, Mariana, who recently split from her husband. Our friendship has endured my divorce from her brother five years ago, even though such convulsions usually result in divorce from the ex's family as well. She has a white cottage near the beach into which she's squeezed her four children after moving out from a waterfront mansion. They and Ruby are in a sunburnt slump around the Xbox in the living room. Outside, plastic strings of Christmas lights hang in the Boxing Day sun.

"It's starting to look like home," I reassure her. Despite the post-Christmas mess, the cottage has a feminine feel, and a resoluteness. Artworks that her husband disliked are now hung around the house.

She stacks the dishwasher with listless intent. "I'm tired," she says. "I live on a shoestring. The credit card's gone. It's hard doing everything – looking after the kids, the house – and working as well".

He's paying child support and at least she had some savings. She is managing to pay the rent, so she knows it could be worse. But it's still such a shock. And to begrudge her that, because she's not doing it as tough as some are, would be disrespectful to the vulnerability that I know she feels.

* * *

Ruby stays with her cousins at the beach over the following week. Even though she is a teenager now, when she is away the quietness is initially unsettling. Sometimes I still panic she has been left behind somewhere; that I've forgotten to pick her up. That's the paradox of being a single mother. And when solitude occurs, there's this sudden sense of space and time to spare.

On a hot afternoon, I slip back into the salt water at the pool, feeling my goggles clinging to my eyes. It's become a summer ritual to swim as sunbathing backpackers languish on daybeds along the pool's edge, the glass fence framing their burning bodies. Out on the harbour, divided from the pool by a timber boardwalk, Riviera speedboats cruise by, splashing Sydney's wealth.

Lingering at the end of the pool, I move aside as another swimmer strokes to a stop. He stands up and scrutinises the sky.

“This might ruin our day,” he says. Another storm is moving in. But it seems too early in the season for snap storms. My right shoulder aches; I stretch it at the end of each cycle of laps. It’s a recurrent throb that flares at unexpected times.

Over Christmas, Mariana, who has a spiritual outlook, pushed on points along my shoulder blade and up my neck.

“Your right side is masculine,” she advised. “It’s man trouble”.

* * *

Lulled by the swim, I walk barefoot back along the path, walking once again in Henry and Bertha’s steps. The storm keeps its distance but it shades Henry Lawson’s statue, the most prominent memorial to him. For once not in a hurry, I stop to scrutinise him, like the swimmer did with the sky.

Henry has weathered the summers well since he was unveiled in 1931. Sculpted in bronze by George Lambert, he stands atop a plinth of sandstone, with those big, sensitive eyes looking out over The Domain and Royal Botanic Garden beside a sundowner bushman and a dog. At that time, the Lawson Literary Society publicly protested that the sculpture’s location was too hidden away, and others criticised how high the plinth was, putting Henry above the faces in the streets that he wrote about.

At a preview of the plaster model held at Lambert’s studio, Henry was described by critics as “an imposing piece of sculpture in larger than life size” that was a “remarkable likeness”.⁵ Lambert modelled Henry’s head on that of his son Jim, who sat for the sculptor to help create this memorial to his father. The dog was modelled on a hound from a local rescue home. But, prior to a showing of a plaster cast of the statue in his Sydney studio, Lambert had to replace the earlier head because it had fallen off onto the studio floor overnight. Henry was as fragile in the art made in his honour as he was in life.

Henry’s hand seems to form around an invisible mug; perhaps meant to be for a Billy tea, but more likely, I think, a beer. Apparently not, according to the newspaper article that intoned, “Mr. Lawson’s hand was not raised in gesticulation whilst reciting but so as to see a distant hill or as if to recall far horizons of memory – a familiar gesture of the poets”.⁶

No, I think. Still looks like he wants a beer. I read a story about the cartoonist David Low, who began on *The Bulletin* and was one of Lawson’s contemporaries:

Low looked at a photograph of the Sydney statue of an unfamiliar Henry living up to the character of Australia’s most beloved poet and, wished that someone had carved on the plinth his immortal line, ‘Beer makes you feel as you ought to feel without beer’.⁷

I think that the irony of Henry’s statue is that, here in the Domain, he is as Bertha wanted – stable. If

⁵ ‘Lawson Memorial: Model on View,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March, 1930, 14. See also George W Lambert Retrospective: Heroes and Icons, Henry Lawson Memorial 1927-1931, National Gallery of Australia.

⁶ ‘Henry Lawson: Memorial Statue Unveiled,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July, 1931, 10. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16796350>.

⁷ Denton Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer*. (Sydney: Rigby/Angus & Robertson, 1963), 220.

only Henry had been like his statue in life. But then Bertha wouldn't have been seduced by his poetry, by his literary beauty, by thinking that she was his muse, which her critics seem to suggest she mistakenly thought she was.

A muse is always a difficult role to sustain once you become the wife. You are associated with domesticity rather than divine inspiration. Then comes the divorce, the demands, the need. The lack.

2.

The following poem, *After All*, was included in a letter from Henry Lawson to Bertha Bredt, delivered to her home on March 5, 1896:⁸

The brooding ghosts of Australian night have gone from the bush and town;
My spirit revives in the morning breeze, though it died when the sun went down;
The river is high and the stream is strong, and the grass is green and tall,
And I fain would think that this world of ours is a good world after all.

The light of passion in dreamy eyes, and a page of truth well read,
The glorious thrill in a heart grown cold of the spirit I thought was dead,
A song that goes to a comrade's heart, and a tear of pride let fall –
And my soul is strong! and the world to me is a grand world after all!

Let our enemies go by their old dull tracks, and theirs be the fault or shame
(The man is bitter against the world who has only himself to blame);
Let the darkest side of the past be dark, and only the good recall;
For I must believe that the world, my dear, is a kind world after all.

It well may be that I saw too plain, and it may be I was blind;
But I'll keep my face to the dawning light, though the devil may stand behind!
Though the devil may stand behind my back, I'll not see his shadow fall,
But read the signs in the morning stars of a good world after all.

Rest, for your eyes are weary, girl – you have driven the worst away –
The ghost of the man that I might have been is gone from my heart to-day;
We'll live for life and the best it brings till our twilight shadows fall;
My heart grows brave, and the world, my girl, is a good world after all.

There's a play about how Henry and Bertha met, co-written by Ruth Park and her husband, D'Arcy Niland. Called *The Courtship of Henry Lawson*,⁹ it was based on interviews with Bertha and on the recollections she published in her book, *My Henry Lawson*.¹⁰ Its characters are Bertha Bredt – an 18-year-old wearing her best brown dress and hat with cream flowers – her mother, Bertha McNamara, the writer Karl Lindgrist, and Henry Lawson, a tall, moustached author already known for his prose and penchant for drink.

Bertha's mother, a widow from Victoria, and her second husband, William McNamara, together run Sydney's socialist bookshop, McNamara's, which smells of beer and onions.¹¹ They also run the adjoining boarding house, which acts as a bohemian and activist living room for writers like Henry Lawson and for aspiring politicians like Jack Lang.

And there were two teenage daughters. One, Hilda, was destined to marry the future Premier, Jack Lang; the other, Bertha Bredt, was a trainee nurse trying to fit in with her mother's new life as matriarch of Sydney's bohemian bookshop. There was also a baby brother, and her mother would have another daughter, Alice, in 1899.

According to the play's narrator, Bertha – who Park dubs Miss B – and Karl Lindgrist meet Henry on the street corner near the bookshop. "He [Henry] is clean, neat and tidy, dressed in a navy suit, a white shirt,

⁸ Henry Lawson, 'After All,' in *The Bulletin*, 28 March, 1896, 13.

⁹ Ruth Park and D'Arcy Niland, *The Courtship of Henry Lawson*. Lawson 202, Rare Books & Special Collections, Fisher Library, University of Sydney.

¹⁰ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*.

¹¹ Bertram Stevens, *Henry Lawson*. Angus & Robertson Publishing Manuscripts A 1889, State Library of NSW, 1917.

and a dark hat. But what eyes! That is what impresses me most...those marvellous dark brown eyes".¹²

Ruth Park later recalls that she asked New Zealand journalist Tom Mills, who knew Henry and Bertha, "Why did Henry fall for Bertha?":

'Oh' he said decisively, 'it was the shape that caught Henry'.
'D'Arcy, when he heard, laughed. 'Sounds like a music hall song!' But it was true that even at seventy-five or six, small round Bertha had an hour-glass shape, probably with the aid of corsets.¹³

I wonder if Lindgrist was also enchanted by Bertha; maybe Henry's sudden appearance made him feel like a third wheel. In the play's version, Lindgrist says goodbye and the couple are left alone; but in Bertha's memoirs he accompanies the couple as they walk through the wide green of The Domain parkland to the tree-fringed point of the harbour, Mrs Macquarie's Chair.

Over a hundred years later, on a late summer afternoon, I walked on the same paths, treading in their footsteps. There was a campaign to move the bats on, because they were ruining the century-old trees. The bats hovered over me as I walked, shadowing the peace.

* * *

My copy of Bertha's memoir, *My Henry Lawson*,¹⁴ has a watermarked cover and the spine is flaking; yet somehow, like a bad marriage, it stays together. I flick through fragile pages of her account of Henry's early life with his mother, the feminist Louisa Lawson, and his father, Peter, in Grenfell on a parched property in outback New South Wales, where Peter panned for glints of gold and Louisa tried to turn the land into a farm, only to feel more fenced in by the restrictions of rural life. Forecasting a future of drought-blighted drudgery, Louisa instead took their youngest son, Peter, and daughter, Gertrude, to Sydney, and the elder Henry soon followed.

I pause at chapter three, Meeting and Marriage. Bertha writes how Henry pursued her, to her mother, Bertha McNamara's, alarm. The younger sister, Hilda, 17, was already dating Jack Lang and now here's Henry, 28, eyeing Bertha, only 18. Mrs McNamara may have been the "Mother of the Labor Movement"¹⁵ but the politics of marriage suitability were quite different.

"My mother placed every obstacle in our way," Bertha recalls of their first dates. "She could see that he was fond of me and knew he had no prospects whatsoever".¹⁶ She says that Henry immediately proposed; she wavered and resisted him at first. He was about to go to New Zealand; feeling deflated by her refusal, he decided to go off as he'd planned. But then, according to Bertha, no sooner had he docked in New Zealand than he caught a ship back, arriving in Sydney on March 4, 1896. She says:

¹² Park and Niland, *The Courtship of Henry Lawson*, 3.

¹³ Ruth Park, *Fishing in the Styx*. (Melbourne: Penguin, 1993), 193.

¹⁴ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*.

¹⁵ Verity Burgmann, 'McNamara, Matilda Emilie Bertha (1853–1931)'. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University [1986], accessed 29 March 2017, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcnamara-matilda-emiliebertha-7431>.

¹⁶ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 33.

He came to see me as soon as he landed...He pleaded with me to be married right away. I refused. Next morning, I received his poem *After All* and a letter.¹⁷

However, there was still Mrs McNamara to convince. Mothers are suspicious of gypsies, writers and artists.

Despite her literary leanings, her mother remained anxious. Enter stage left, Mrs McNamara in Ruth Park's play:

Miss B: Mother, he's good and honest. And I love him.

Mother: Child, you simply don't know what you're talking about. Can't you see how unhappy you'll be?

Miss B: [Stiffening]. How could I be unhappy?

Mother: Dear, I like Harry. I sincerely like him, but I'd rather do anything than see you married to him.

Miss B: But you should be proud...

Mother: I'm not speaking of him as a writer. You little idiot, do you think you'd be marrying a book of verse?

Miss B: I'm not a child, Mother. I'd love him just the same if he were a...a lamplighter.

Oh Mother, he needs someone to love him and encourage him, and help him.

Mother: And who will love and help and encourage you when you need it, Bertha?¹⁸

Fathers are worse. So are stepfathers, which Bill McNamara was to Bertha. I imagine him lecturing Bertha over the dinner table as Mrs McNamara flustered and flapped. When I told my father a century later that I was marrying a musician, he said, "Does he have an earring? Who will look after you?"

I imagine the McNamaras coming back to the same instinctive question.

* * *

On Henry's wider horizon, there was also anxiety about the impulsive courtship. At the offices of Angus and Robertson, George Robertson, the publisher of Henry's newly published 1896 book, *The Days When the World Was Wide*,¹⁹ tried to stop the marriage. Bertha says that when she met the publisher for the first time, he "pleaded" all morning, trying to talk her out of the folly of marrying Henry. "Come to the Mountains," he cajoled, inviting her to his Blue Mountains home. "I have three little girls of my own. I'd rather see them dead than marry a temperamental genius who is a drunkard as well".²⁰

"I will keep him straight," Bertha tells the publisher. Robertson's P.A, Rebecca Wiley, later recalls the publisher confided to her:

She had great big hazel eyes, and shining with excitement; they were undoubtedly very much in love with each other...I knew Henry even then was a confirmed drinker; had at times a very nasty temper, and all the other things that go to make a genius very difficult to live with...I could see nothing but tragedy in it for both of them. Well as everyone knows, it turned out unhappiness for them both.²¹

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Park and Niland, *The Courtship of Henry Lawson*, 13.

¹⁹ Henry Lawson, *The Days When the World Was Wide*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1896).

²⁰ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 37. See also Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*. (Sydney: Harper Collins, 1991), 147.

²¹ Rebecca Wiley quoting George Robertson's conversations with Bertha appears in Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, 147. Roderick cites the original source as 'Recollections of George Robertson' in private possession, 424. Bertha Lawson also recalls the conversation in *My Henry Lawson*, 37.

Henry's mother, Louisa, sided with the worried publisher and with Bertha's mother. She had warned prophetically in one of her editorials published in her feminist paper, *The Dawn*: "The woman who cannot give a better reason for marrying than she is in love, is likely to come to grief".²²

* * *

The surprise ceremony on April 15, 1896 at the Weldon Matrimonial Agency was officiated by Reverend W.T Adams, with two strangers as witnesses. Henry, in a love-struck impulsive rush, brought her from where she was boarding with a family friend, Mrs Schaebel, to the ceremony he'd secretly arranged in the city. Henry, 28, writes his occupation as "journalist" on the wedding certificate and Bertha, 18, is a "gentlewoman".²³ Her family were still anxious, but her mother had consented:

He [Henry] wheedled the signature out of my mother. Perhaps she felt as I did, that to have refused him when we loved one another so much would have broken his heart.²⁴

He was nervous, and worried about his shirt. Her parents and his mother, Louisa, knew nothing of the ceremony.

If Bertha was disappointed with the rushed plainness of the day, she doesn't reveal it in her memoir.

When you think about it, she rarely reveals anything at all. Bertha recalls:

We spent a happy day together and in the evening went to a hotel near St Andrews Cathedral, I think it was the Town Hall Hotel...On the following morning we went hunting for rooms in Darlinghurst...In Forbes St we found a tiny flat.²⁵

Bertha is more forthcoming in *Memories*, which was her contribution to a collection of essays and reminiscences, *Henry Lawson by His Mates*, edited jointly by their daughter and the academic John Le Gay Brereton in 1931:

My trousseau was all ready and we were to be married at St Stephen's Newtown. But Harry had not been able to win over the family though he did obtain my mother's consent. On 15 April he arrived early in the morning and begged me to come to town and meet a dear friend of his. He said, 'I want you to look very nice so put on your wedding dress to please me.' But I was horrified at the thought of wearing my wedding dress before my wedding. However we finally agreed on my travelling dress – a green silk frock with a brown hat wreathed in poppies! We told Mrs Schaebel we'd be back by half-past three. When we got to town, Harry showed me another indignant letter that he had received. He was very troubled and said that he felt convinced that unless we married straight away, we would be separated in the end. So he had arranged with a clergyman to marry us privately if only I was willing. He showed me his special licence. But I told him that it was impossible. Our wedding had been arranged, the guests invited, and all plans fixed for our Blue Mountain honeymoon. In any case, I thought Mrs Schaebel should be told. But Harry said, we could be married and then go straight out and tell her. He was so afraid, in view of all the opposition, that something would come between us; he had a strong intuition that we might be parted. And loving him so dearly I felt that there was much truth in what he said and I consented. We went straight round

²² Louisa Lawson, 'Unhappy Love Matches,' *The Dawn*, Vol 2, no. 2 (1889), in *The First Voice of Australian Feminism, Excerpts from Louisa Lawson The Dawn 1888 – 1895*, ed. Olive Lawson. (Sydney: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 28.

²³ Henry Lawson, Wedding Certificate, NSW Births, Deaths and Marriages, April 15, 1896.

²⁴ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 39.

²⁵ *ibid.*

to the clergyman's home and were married – a member of his family acting as a witness.

We started off afterwards for the Newtown tram, but Harry said no, we must go out in state in a cab as befitted the occasion. So we drove out to Newtown to find Mrs Schaebel very angry, because I was late. Harry bent down and kissed her and said, 'That doesn't matter, because she's my wife now. Here is our certificate.' Mrs Schaebel was most upset, and asked what she was to do about the bridesmaids and the guests. He said, 'Never mind, just say we are married.' She was very indignant but because she was very fond of us both she forgave us in the end.²⁶

The day after the wedding, Henry took Bertha to his creative home, *The Bulletin* magazine office near Circular Quay. I imagine him holding her hand up the stairs to the office with the horns of the harbour ferries sounding like a warning. *The Bulletin's* editor, J.F. Archibald, like George Robertson, was well aware that Henry was high maintenance, although he was still writing and being published regularly.

"An achieving alcoholic," a friend quipped about Henry Lawson when we discussed him during a chance meeting at a Kings Cross café. My friend had spent years managing crisis accommodation so he had seen many people like Henry turn up at the door, seeking a place to stay. Now he owned a café supporting caffeine addicts.

Earlier in the decade, Archibald sent Henry into the Australian bush. In a series of articles for the magazine, Henry described the drought and hardship he encountered which would define his work. In part, Archibald sent Henry to the bush to help the young writer define a landscape, but also because he was already concerned about Henry's health.

I find a picture of the two men together. It is as candid as an early 20th century photograph can be. Henry, tall and lanky in a suit, leans into the much older, smaller and impeccable Archibald. He looks like he is listening hard, perhaps because of his partial deafness that developed in childhood, and also perhaps because Archibald was his mentor.

At *The Bulletin* office, Henry announced that they had married, stunning Archibald and his colleagues. Archibald was the first to diplomatically step forward and wish them happiness:

"Is this really true?" literary critic A.G Stephens asked. "And not a joke of Harry's?"

"It is quite true," Bertha assured him. "We were married yesterday. I'm going to try and make him happy".

Stephens squeezed her hand, "I hope he is going to try and make you happy".

Bertha writes:

This announcement was a bolt from the blue; it staggered everyone to Harry's joy. But it upset me a little to have us regarded as freaks. But I found it was not I who had astonished them, but the fact I had married a poet genius whom they regarded, apparently, as a man who could never make an income to maintain a home.²⁷

* * *

²⁶ Bertha Lawson, *Memories*, in *Henry Lawson by His Mates*, ed. Bertha Lawson [Jago] and John Le Gay Brereton. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1931), 81-82.

²⁷ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 40.

Now that I am looking, I find Henry everywhere. He's part of the city. I think he would have liked to have known that he has become a stumble-upon – a sudden appearance during a stroll. Walking from the city to the harbourside pool once more, as I do many times over the summer, I cut across the Gardens and then push the Henry Lawson Gate that exits to Mrs Macquarie's Chair.

Another day, when walking along the Circular Quay boardwalk to visit friends at the Opera Bar, I tread on a plaque dedicated to the poet, Dame Mary Gilmore. Mary and Henry first met through their mothers, who were both feminists, when Henry had been living with his mother, Louisa, in Sydney. Mary remembers him as deeply sensitive and observant of Sydney, reflecting his famous poem, *Faces in the Street*:

He used to take me out to see the wrong things, the things repressive of the rights of Australia; the things like a blot upon her and which prevent her being herself – the low wage workers, the China-man [sic] working at treadle saws in underground cellars, lit only by the gratings in the street, the huddled houses by the old Argyle Cut.²⁸

Mary recalls that after their first meeting, Henry came to her home almost every evening. But then a "difference of opinion" cooled the friendship between the two mothers:

This breach made Mrs Lawson very bitter over Henry's coming so much to our place. She liked me, however, and when she found that Henry wanted to marry me, she asked me to stay with her when my mother went to Junee before taking up her post on the *Daily Telegraph*... Meanwhile she arranged for Henry and Peter to go to West Australia 'to make money quickly,' she said 'if Henry was to marry'. Henry, loth to leave me, the night before he sailed, asked me to elope with him, and go to a registry office that evening and get married and that somehow he would arrange my passage in the boat next morning. Some sense of unfitness, some realisation that I was not ready for marriage, made me say no.²⁹

She writes that when she told Henry she was going to the Australian colony at Cosme in Paraguay at the invitation of its founder, Henry "begged me on his knees not to go. He broke down completely. 'Don't leave me,' he says. 'If you go away I am ruined.'"³⁰ She infers that, in her absence and without her guidance, Henry made the mistake of marrying Bertha and that his drinking only began after their relationship ended:

I always had great influence for good over Henry. He would never come near me when drinking but always came in repentance...It was not that he drank much. Twice only before I went to South America did he ever really take too much that I knew of. He came to me immediately about it. He never touched liquor at all till more or less our engagement was definitely broken and ended.³¹

She recalls that as the time drew nearer for her to leave for South America, where she was to take charge of the school, Henry became more and more sad and depressed:

The night before I sailed he broke right down. He knelt to me and begged me not to go. 'If you go, I am ruined,' he said. He said, 'My life will never be worth anything again'. And a singular saying was, 'If you go they will get hold of me; while you are here they cannot'. From what I now remember and what I have been told of late years, and now remember, I know he referred to the family he married into – a fact I am sure of it for I remember telling him 'he could not be married against his will

²⁸ Mary Gilmore, 'Personal History: Henry Lawson and I,' c. 1922, in Dame Mary Gilmore Papers 1911 – 1954, A329, State Library of NSW, 1

²⁹ *ibid*, 4.

³⁰ *ibid*, 5.

³¹ *ibid*, 8.

as all he had to do was refuse'. But there was some fear in his mind that this argument could not dissipate and I half guessed what it might be.³²

While she did not meet Bertha until 1902, Mary Gilmore provides an alternative narrative to the romance. Who to believe?

"She pursued him," claims Dame Mary Gilmore. Bertha ruined him, she insists. Ruined! The Dame argues:

Last week (1922) Frank McGrath of the old Edinburgh Hotel – in those days the writers' rendezvous – said, speaking voluntarily: 'And by Jove! don't I remember his marriage! She chased him till she got him! She never let him alone till she caught him... She threatened to commit suicide or something, and said that her father was going to turn her out into the streets if he wouldn't marry her!' It was what Henry himself told me once in a broken-hearted moment when his wife had been particularly cruel to him.³³

Ruth Park and D'Arcy Niland became friends with both Mary and Bertha in their later lives. Comparing the two women, Ruth observed:

We both found Bertha very likeable. She was durable, humorous and kindly. My impression was that, when young, she had probably been a voluptuous little bundle. Still she gave off that indefinable fragrance that attracts men.³⁴

Henry didn't go to South America but as his domesticity with Bertha deepened, I imagine his mind wandering at times to a different life in Paraguay, where Mary married a fellow adventurer, Will Gilmore, in 1897 and changed her name from her maiden Cameron to Gilmore. Upon her return to Australia in 1902, Mary became one of the few women publishing to prominence rather than retreating to a wifely life.

Mrs Isabel Byers, who looked after Henry in the years after the separation, believes that Henry loved Bertha, but he rushed into the marriage. She says that Henry told her:

That he was not deeply in love with Miss Bredt at the time he married her but that as time went on, he grew to love her more and more... Miss Bredt was unhappy at home when she came to know Lawson, and that Lawson out of sympathy for her took her away from her home and placed her under the care of Mrs. Schaebel. Mrs. Lawson's brother said this was really a case of abduction as Miss Bredt was not of age and that Lawson on hearing of this arranged for a hasty marriage.³⁵

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Park, *Fishing in the Styx*, 194.

³⁵ 'Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers,' c. 1925, ed. Aubrey C Curtis, in Lawson Family Papers, including papers of Isabel Byers relating to Henry Lawson, 1892–1925, MLMSS 3694/Box 2/Folder 2, State Library of NSW.

3.

Walking past some bunched terraces lining the back streets of Sydney's inner city, I notice a large renovated sandstone building that is adorned with a plaque explaining the building was once the Lunatic Reception House, Darlinghurst, and "Noted Australian poet and writer Henry Lawson was one such patient". It is followed by his poem, *After All*, that Henry sent Bertha. I wonder if the author of the gold plaque knew their history, and the blame many of Henry's contemporaries loaded onto Bertha for his admittance into an asylum.

Around the corner, I walk past the ground floor's medical suites that face onto the street. I pick up a chiropractic clinic's brochure from a stand outside the clinic's door. It asks, "Are you in stress or pain?"

Yes, Henry and Bertha would have answered. Yes.

The building's plaque adds that, "Henry's face is on the \$10 note". Remembering this, on my way home, I stop at a bakery and break a \$20 bill. The assistant gives me, as I hoped, a \$10 note in the change. I turn it over.

"That's not right," I say aloud, confused.

"What?" the assistant asks.

"It's okay. It's not the note," I reassure, realising I've muttered aloud. Well it is. The face on the back is definitely not Henry's profile. There's no moustache. The face is too refined and confident in the way it raises its chin. A small figure gallops down the note with the inscription, "the word had passed around..."

Right. I get it now. It's Banjo Paterson, he of *The Man From Snowy River*.³⁶ The two poets clashed over their depictions of the bush, with one, Banjo, celebrating horsemanship and manhood, and the other, Lawson, chronicling the poverty that dries spirits in droughts.

I turn the note over to double-check the other side. I recognise the woman as Dame Mary Gilmore, as if another reminder from her not to forget her self-proclaimed importance in Henry's life. She defines this valuable piece of paper – an intimidating Dame assured of her worth.

An internet search later solves my confusion over Henry's disappearance from the note. Henry's portrait was printed on the original \$10 note, introduced in the 1960s, but his rival and ex-girlfriend have since shafted him. That would hurt.

But, despite the disappearance of this constant reminder in wallets, he is still ever present. At Bondi Beach I pick up an art postcard which features a drawing of Henry Lawson's headstone on the cliff top at Waverley Cemetery. On a bushwalk around Berry's Bay with my daughter and her friend, a verse from his poem *Kerosene Bay* is inscribed in the concrete. While getting my sore shoulder pummelled in a Chinese remedial massage shop in North Sydney, I hear a lady at the reception say loudly on her mobile phone, "I didn't know you were up here! I'm going to tell my sister, who lives right down in Henry Lawson Drive".

He keeps turning up. He's in my mind now. On a trip to Canberra, I pause by the glass-encased display of a gold cast of his long, emaciated writing hand at the National Library sculpted by his friend, Nelson

³⁶ Banjo Paterson, *The Man From Snowy River and Other Verses*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson/Young J. Pentland, 1895).

Illingworth. There's an annual Henry Lawson Festival in Grenfell, where he grew up. Before Gallipoli, he was the poet who created mateship. The Dickens of the Bush. He's been mythologised, anthologised, and analysed.

Bertha has been forgotten. Filed away in boxes of letters, birthday cards and notes.

* * *

Ghost signs remain on the streets. A leather goods shop sign is bleached into brick on a Castlereagh Street wall. Further along, at number 221, the site of McNamara's, where once communist posters hung in the bookshop windows, the Bank of Sydney now displays its interest rates in its windows, which are painted a plain, steel grey. Scaffolding covers the corner where Bertha says she first met Henry.

The Royal Town Hall Hotel, periodically fined for Sunday trading, is now a 7-Eleven store, and cars rush up the Drutt Street hill to the city. Walking with Ruby and her friends in the city, eating ice cream on a summer night, we walk past the Edinburgh Pub that Mary Gilmore referred to as the meeting place for "Botany Bay Bohemia". Mottled tiles decorate the outside walls and a chalk sign advertises Happy Hour. Looking in the windows, I see a conservative crowd of tradies, tourists and punters hanging around the betting screen. Bohemia has moved on.

At home, I flick through a monograph of Harold Cazneaux's photographs of Sydney in the early 20th century.³⁷ He captured washing hanging between dusty lanes; a wet North Sydney street dominated by the local town hall spire; a row of hansom cabs with docile horses waiting for rides in a city with over 3,000 pubs and 225,000 people.³⁸

Artist and *Bulletin* cartoonist Norman Lindsay drew the clutch of wharfies, policemen, Chinese and hatted men milling around the Quay,³⁹ where he went weekly to *The Bulletin* offices nearby and ate at cheap cafés clustering around the area late at night. As today, there was constant public debate in the papers about drunkenness. And there was talk, always, of the weather: in summer snap thunderstorms, a restless heat and drenching downpours that streamed down the streets.

* * *

The past, as we remember it, is always individual. We have flashbacks that are unique to our memories – endless parallel lives which form a city's history. Walking with my mother through Hyde Park, we stop at the intersection of College and William Streets. It is as I've always known it: a diamond of trees behind me, the underground roof of the Cook and Phillip Pool studded with fountains across the road, and the sandstone Museum of Sydney gracing the opposite corner.

"I was hit here once," my mother remarks.

"Here? When?" I asked, surprised. My mother grew up in Sydney but, after living for decades in the

³⁷ Philip Geeves, ed., *Philip Geeves Presents Cazneaux's Sydney, 1904-1934*. (Sydney: David Ell Press, 1980).

³⁸ Cyril Pearl, *Wild Men of Sydney*. (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1958), 11–12.

³⁹ Norman Lindsay, 'Circular Quay in the Nineties' in *Bohemians at the Bulletin*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1895), 8–9.

lulled lifestyle of northern NSW, she now has geographic Alzheimer's when she visits the city, never sure where she is until she has reached the safety of David Jones department store which has remained unchanged.

"This old hag hit my friend and I with her bag. We were waiting to cross the road to walk home. She says, 'It's my corner! My corner!' There were two sailors watching it all, laughing their heads off. She thought we'd taken her spot".

"Her spot?" I ask, thinking the old lady was homeless.

"It was a bad corner then," she explains.

Oh, yes. William Street unfurls from the city into the Valley of the Dolls, then up the hill to Kings Cross, where a pavement sign marks Dame Mary Gilmore's home.

Who knows the truth about Henry and Bertha? Perhaps their daughter, who was christened Bertha Louisa after her mother and grandmother, but nicknamed Barta by Henry. Her unpublished notes about her parents nestle among other Lawson Family folders in the Mitchell Library:

It is certain she [Mother] and Dad did love each other...They were young and full of hope. They were eager for the future...But it was he [Henry] who saw the situation that might lie before them both – not Mother, headstrong, eager, impetuous, wanting nothing to stand in her way. Dad saw it. J. Le Gay [Brereton] told me that he came to him for help. He was so worried. He loved her. He wanted to marry her. He was afraid. If he couldn't depend on himself, what would happen? Calamity for him but most of all for her. He had more than half made up his mind to get out of Sydney and go back to the bush. He did not know what to do. J Le Gay told me, he said: 'Look Henry, I've known you to do silly things, but I've never known you to run away before.' Dad thanked him and went off...Dad saw very clearly, even when he could not help himself, in the tragic hopelessness of his own situation, to do anything about it.⁴⁰

The hopelessness.

⁴⁰ Bertha Lawson (Jago), Unpublished Notes, in Lawson Family Papers 1896–1968 MLMSS 7692 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

4.

Letter dated June 25, 1897 from Henry Lawson to Hugh Maccallum, Angus and Robertson, written from Mangamaunu, Kaikoura:⁴¹

... I felt like writing to you somehow, perhaps because of your kind reference to Mrs. Lawson. I knew she was a gem, from the first. I was right in that, as in most things where drink did not madden my instinct. She is a favourite everywhere and worshipped here... which reminds me when a Maori woman opens her heart to a white woman, she loves that white woman and would trust her with her life, and might lay it down for her.

I want to show some of my kind relatives (who never assisted me or thought of me as except perhaps as a soft idiotic fool to get money and work out of) who advised Bertha against me from the first, and kindly told her all my worst points – whilst, on the other hand, and in common with one or two good but mistaken friends, they persuaded me against being 'trapped' and ruining my prospects when 'I might marry money and –'

I want to show them, if they be worth showing, that I have made a success of my married life – and hers. I think I've married money too, as well as fame, but that will be seen. And I want to show the true friends, bushmen and others who trusted and believed in me through it all - I want for their sake to write myself up to the top of the Australian gum...

With kindest regards from Mrs. Lawson and myself.

Yours truly, Henry Lawson

* * *

Billboards line the railway tunnel of the underground station. My gaze settles on a larger-than-life New Zealand fur seal flopped on a rock, its whiskers feathering across the poster, with the ocean horizon behind it. "Tomorrow you will meet the locals," the poster promises.

I already have. I recognise the locale as Kaikoura, on the east coast of the South Island, where the Lawsons lived for a while, isolated by cliffs, beaches, rocky shores, gullies and wild forgotten sheep in the hills.

Their unlikely appointment here, teaching at a Maori school, came after they had returned to Sydney from a short stint in Western Australia soon after they married, where they lived in a flimsy patchwork hessian tent with a floor of upturned corrugated iron cases, with contaminated water and an oil drum for an oven, in a makeshift settlement sprawling on the outskirts of the goldrush town, Perth. The narrative of mining more than a century ago sounds similar to today, where Fly in Fly Out workers bolt to the boom, leaving women to care for the children.

While they were in the West, Henry's second book of stories and sketches, the classic *While the Billy Boils*, was published; but the royalties didn't assist their financial predicament. Gold was more a glimmer, a finite rush of hope for fortune. Their hunt for wealth returned to the intangible gold in Henry's mind.

Bertha recalls:

Henry still wanted to go to Coolgardie or some other place in the goldfields; but first he wrote to his friend, Smiler Hales asking his advice. His reply was to the effect it

⁴¹ Henry Lawson, Letter to Hugh Maccallum, 25 June, 1897, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890-1922*, ed. Colin Roderick. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970), 71-72.

would be madness to bring a young woman out there. So we stayed [in Perth]. Harry did not want to leave me, keenly as he wanted to dig for gold.⁴³

They sold their Perth camp for 35 pounds and used the money to return to Sydney and plan for another adventure in New Zealand.

Bertha seems the more practical one of the two: “I decided on New Zealand as the place of refuge” she recalls.⁴⁴ She presents herself as the steerer of their marriage in these first few years, searching for opportunities that offered financial stability but leaving Henry “free to write”.⁴⁵

To help meet the cost of their passages to New Zealand, Bertha went to Henry’s mentor, Archibald, who had funded his famous Bourke expedition chronicling the drought in 1892. I imagine Archibald, impeccably dressed in a suit that reflected his Francophile impulses, looking over his glasses at Bertha in his *Bulletin* office. Archibald perhaps recalls why he had sent Henry bush in the first place, to where bars were in different towns rather than different streets, and where Henry could feel inspired rather than intoxicated.

Henry’s friend, Bertram Stevens, who would later help them with their separation, saw Bertha’s efforts as genuine in trying to keep Henry focused, but he says that Henry was wily:

She talked as one who was devoted to Henry, but had already discovered the inconvenience of having a genius for a husband. At this time, Lawson certainly had a good deal of respect for his wife and recognised that she was trying to keep him from drink for his own good. He amused himself by dodging her efforts. He did not disclose to her all he earned & on the *Bulletin* paydays he would hide money in his hat & boots and plant a few sixpences in corners of the room. When these tricks failed, he used to have small deposits of cash with a friendly barmaid to provide against dry days.⁴⁶

Yet there may have been another reason for Bertha’s determination to move to New Zealand. Another “shape” that had caught Henry’s eye at his friend Nelson Illingworth’s studio. Henry’s biographers – their many offerings bound in hardback with old dust jackets hanging off them – range from those convinced that Henry was in love with a real rival to Bertha, to those wondering if the relationship was a creation of his fertile, romantic mind.

* * *

Excerpt from Henry Lawson’s poem *Hannah Thornburn*:⁴⁷

Her hair was red gold on head Grecian,
But fluffed from the parting away,
And her eyes were the warm grey venetian
That comes with the dawn of the day.
No Fashion or Fad could entrap her,
And a simple print work dress wore she,
But her long limbs were formed for the 'wrapper'
And her fair arms were meant to be free.

⁴³ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 46.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 59.

⁴⁵ *ibid*.

⁴⁶ Stevens, *Henry Lawson*.

⁴⁷ Henry Lawson, ‘Hannah Thornburn,’ in *For Australia and Other Poems*. (Melbourne: Standard Publishing, 1913), 217–223.

(O I knew by the thrill of pure passion
At the touch of her elbow or hand –
By the wife's loveless eyes that would flash on
The feeling I could not command.
O, I knew when revulsion came rushing
O, I knew by the brush strokes that hurt
At the sight of a sculptor friend brushing
The clay from the hem of her skirt.)

* * *

Depending on which version you read, Hannah Thornburn may have been a “rather plain, delicate”⁴⁸ girl. Or she may have been barely five foot, with red hair and grey eyes, a full mouth that artists like to paint, and slender “like a clinging vine”.⁴⁹

She was a bookseller's daughter, a Sunday school teacher and an artist's model for Henry's friend, the curly haired, poncho-wearing sculptor, Nelson Illingworth, nicknamed Buster, who also sculpted Norman Lindsay's second wife, the artist's model Rose Soadey. Rose remembers how, when modelling at the Illingworth household, she passed through the kitchen where Buster's wife was fanning herself and, ignoring the woman, going to her husband while the children argued over who would do the washing-up. I imagine Henry walking through the same scene in the kitchen, and meeting Hannah sensuously wrapped in a cloak in between poses.

⁴⁸ Stevens, *Henry Lawson*.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

5.

With or without Hannah as an impetus, Henry and Bertha arrived in Wellington in March 1897, with Henry's books their only asset. I go back to the ragged pages of Bertha's memoir, in which she writes how, as in Perth, she and Henry were again "stranded in a strange town". I feel for her as I read on:

I realised that my dreams when I sailed with Harry for Western Australia as a bride had been far from realised. We had made two voyages and gained nothing by the changes. I did not realise then the restlessness which always filled Harry's heart and soul, a state which was entirely due to the blood that ran in his veins – wanderer's blood.⁵⁰

In Wellington, Harry the wanderer had a letter of recommendation from Archibald and previous acquaintance with the New Zealand politician, Edward Tregear, Secretary for Labour. "He [Tregear] became our dear friend,"⁵¹ Bertha writes. They initially stayed with Tom Mills, the New Zealand journalist whom Ruth Park later interviewed for the play about Bertha and Henry. "They were fighting like wildcats even while they were with us," Mills told Ruth. "We were glad when they left".⁵²

Bertha says she went on her own to the New Zealand Government offices, where she was introduced to the Minister for Education, whose staff offered Bertha and Henry a Maori school position, with Henry as teacher, and Bertha as assistant, even though neither had taught anything in their lives. But another of Henry's biographers, W.H Pearson – I keep finding them – researched this time in New Zealand and thinks that Henry was the one who met the Education Minister, as he is sceptical any minister would make such an appointment without meeting the poet.

Regardless, Bertha, writing three decades later in the anthology, *Henry Lawson By His Mates*, remembers their time in New Zealand as being amongst the happiest periods in their marriage. "I came away with a month's salary in advance," she insists in *Memories*:

My duties would be to look after the Maori women and children, to instruct them in hygiene, and to teach them how to sew (an art which I have always been unable to teach myself). I was elated and went home to inform Harry, who had just come in from the *Mail* office. When I told him we had secured government appointments he laughed very heartily and took it as a great joke. He said, 'Well, when do we start and where?'⁵³

The truth keeps shifting like a sandbank.

* * *

I have a new flatmate, a student from New Zealand. Remembering she is from the South Island, I ask, "Do you know much about Kaikoura?"

Cross-legged on the floor in front of her computer, she nods. "My nan and pop live there".

⁵⁰ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 51.

⁵¹ Lawson, *Memories*, 96.

⁵² Park, *Fishing In The Styx*, 193.

⁵³ Lawson, *Memories*, 95–96.

“What’s it like now?”

She thinks. “Quiet”.

“Retirees?” I suggest, thinking of the beach town where I grew up, that has nursing homes along the river and beach dunes in which scrub and snakes grow among the sand.

“More a surfing holiday town,” she corrects.

“What about Mangamaunu?” I stumble over the pronunciation. She looks confused.

“Maybe I pronounced it wrong?” The grand Maori names that stretch over New Zealand’s townships and beaches are a graceful mess of vowels. “It’s a beach near Kaikoura, I think. It used to be the Maori Pah where the people I’m researching lived a century ago”.

“It’s probably where all the seals are,” she says, and returns to her computer.

* * *

I find a webcam surf forecast for Mangamaunu and images of a swell breaking on volcanic rocks with, as Bertha saw in 1897, the Kaikouras cresting in the distance. Bertha recalls:

We arrived in the beautiful little town of Kaikoura, and drove in a buggy to the schoolhouse. Mangamaunu was about eleven miles away, and when we arrived my hopes went down to zero. I had expected some sort of settlement, but found it was just a Maori pah beside the sea. It was the most picturesque with the snow covered Kaikouras behind us, and the lonely ocean breaking on rugged, rocky coast. Between the mountains and the sea, was a flax morass with the schoolhouse situated on a slight rise. A few Maori whares were scattered in this flax swamp, but the main pah was on a high hill above the school...

When we arrived at the schoolhouse, the Maoris came forward to greet us one carrying some kumera (sweet potatoes) and another bearing a plate of wild pig. There were about 50 of them – all ages, from infants in arms to old tattooed warriors of eighty. The girls were beautiful and appealed to me with their wonderful dark eyes. I was enraptured with the Maori babies.⁵⁴

The Lawsons took over the existing schoolhouse, which had a neglected garden in the paddock next to it. In between teaching the children, with Henry sticking his head in occasionally to check how it was going, she made a home:

I took the outer covering off our new mattress and made red and white striped blinds of that. Harry cut bracken and placed our mattress on a high pile of the fern. And there we just camped for a while, cooking in our billy can and fry pan. Harry got timber from Kaikoura and made a corner wardrobe and the other things we needed. He also made two nice chairs from the casks.

I covered them with cretonne and they looked quite pretty. I bought flax mats from the Maoris. Together we stained and painted the chairs, tables and floors, and with the white flax mats, and an abundance of beautiful New Zealand clematis, and wild flowers, we made a charming home.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Lawson, *Memories*, 95–96.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 97–99.

I remember reading about one of their early conversations, when they were dating and planning their future. Bertha says Henry never wanted a house decorated with cretonne – a heavy, cotton printed fabric that covered furniture. It must have represented domesticity to him, a static way of life.

* * *

It may have been the isolation, the cliffs, or the cretonne-covered furniture, or their corroding companionship, or being just too far from a pub, but after a year in Mangamaunu the Lawsons resign from their isolated teaching post, with Henry blaming “the loneliness... affecting Mrs. Lawson’s health”.⁵⁶ Bertha insists in *Memories* that, “the loneliness didn’t bother me”. In fact, she claims: “Harry was thoroughly contented and a great deal of his best work was done here. We were ideally happy, like two children in the Garden of Eden”.⁵⁷ She added, as if defending her decision, and the location as a writer’s retreat, that it was in New Zealand that Henry writes another defining classic of his career, *Joe Wilson and his Mates*.⁵⁸

The deciding factor for Bertha seems to have been the impending birth of their first baby:

We began to think and talk seriously of leaving the schoolhouse. Jim was to be born and there was no hope of proper nursing or medical aid there...
About eight weeks before Jim was born we sent in our resignations...
A few days before Jim was born, Wellington was rocked by one of the heaviest earthquake shocks it had known for years. It was a terrifying experience...
We were offered another Maori school near Auckland, but Harry decided against it as I was not yet strong and we made up our minds to come home.⁵⁹

Biographer Denton Prout writes that Henry described their growing tension in the short story, *Water Them Geraniums*, published in *Joe Wilson And His Mates*; it was inspired by their nights in the schoolhouse. Henry thinly disguised Bertha as “Mary” and observed that his wife had changed from his angel. But Henry doesn’t recognise his own role in her rapid maturity, as well as her pregnancy:

...Mary was still pretty, but not the little dumpling she had been; she was thinner now. She had big, dark hazel eyes that shone a little too much when she was pleased or excited. I thought at times there was something very German about her expression: also something aristocratic about the turn of her nose, which nipped in at the nostrils when she spoke... She had a will of her own, as shown sometimes by the obstinate knit in her forehead between the eyes. Mary sat still by the fire, and presently I saw her chin tremble.
‘What is it, Mary?’
She turned her face farther from me. I felt tired, disappointed, and irritated—suffering from a reaction.
‘Now, what is it, Mary?’ I asked; ‘I’m sick of this sort of thing. Haven’t you got everything you wanted? You’ve had your own way. What’s the matter with you now?’
‘You know very well, Joe’.
‘But I *don’t* know,’ I said. I knew too well.
She said nothing.
‘Look here, Mary,’ I said, putting my hand on her shoulder, ‘don’t go on like that; tell me what’s the matter?’
‘It’s only this,’ she said suddenly, ‘I can’t stand this life here; it will kill me!’
I had a pannikin of tea in my hand, and I banged it down on the table.

⁵⁶ Henry Lawson, Letter to the Secretary for Education, Wellington, 28 September, 1897. In in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890-1922*, ed. Colin Roderick. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1970), 78.

⁵⁷ Lawson, *Memories*, 99–100.

⁵⁸ Henry Lawson, *Joe Wilson and His Mates*. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1901).

⁵⁹ Lawson, *Memories*, 106–107.

'This is more than a man can stand!' I shouted. 'You know very well that it was you that dragged me out here...'⁶⁰

Their marriage had already changed their relationship from romance to resentment. Isn't it how it always goes, however hard you try? Or is it because you try too hard?

I hear Bertha reply: "Henry, it is more than I can stand".

* * *

I'm thinking about Bertha in New Zealand, and how her daughter writes down her memories of her parents. I'm thinking about how her mother "faced life always with confidence and courage" and showed "kindness" and "extraordinary charm". She was "enchanting," "inspired love," and had "magnetic and compelling fascination".⁶¹ She was generous and ready with an impulsive readiness in friendship.

But her daughter also writes, as only a daughter can, of her mother's dominating strength, volatility, her high emotion, her swift temper, her need to guide, her passionate possessiveness, her demand for leadership. This made life fragile and exhausting for them all at times.

I'm rattled. Am I angelicising her? Have I fallen for the martyred single mother? As if anticipating my thoughts, Bertha's daughter continues: "These things were quite unknown to the many who came to her. They made the rich and complicated pattern of her life. Few people saw the underlying turmoil in her. It was my part to watch for the danger signals".⁶²

I'm on watch.

⁶⁰ Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer*, 165. See also Henry Lawson, 'Water Them Geraniums,' c. 1901, in Leonard Cronin ed., *Henry Lawson: A Campfire Yarn*. (Redwood: Melbourne, 2000), 721.

⁶¹ Lawson [Jago], Unpublished Notes.

⁶² *ibid.*

6.

I walk down Barcom Avenue in the shadow of St Vincent's Hospital to Ice Street. On the corner is an old two-storey building painted grey with a discreet sign. A man smoking a cigarette leans over the fence of the wheelchair ramp that leads up to the entrance on the Ice Street side of the building, that turns out to be a care centre for the homeless, offering health and detox services. There were terraces down both streets once but the homes across the road from the smoking man were resumed and now there's a tarred space for tankers to fill the towering oxygen cylinders that stand there and supply the hospital.

The avenue's row of outpatient clinics and hospital buildings soften to workers' cottages standing side by side, having stubbornly survived the street's metamorphosis into one of Sydney's largest hospitals. It was in these streets, on the corner of Ice and the now-disappeared Great Barcom Street, that the writers Fred Broomfield and Victor Daley lived. In 1898, with Henry and other writers, they formed Bertha's nemesis, the Dawn and Dusk Club – named after Daley's first volume of poetry, *At Dawn and Dusk*.⁶³

Henry and Bertha had returned to Sydney with their baby, Joseph, nicknamed Jim, soon after his birth. Back in Sydney, Henry was happier. He (who else?) thought of the club's motto, "Roost high and crow low".⁶⁴ Shakespeare was an honorary spiritual Dusker. *Bulletin* writer Jim Philp, who edited Sydney's Chinese newspaper, wrote the club rules in Chinese. It sounds a lot of fun.

Oh, it was, says George Taylor, who writes about the club in his 1918 memoir, *Those Were the Days*. At the State Library of NSW, I open a copy of his book and find an inscription, "to Mrs Gilmour:" [sic] "May the Good God bless you with health content so that for many, many years you can continue your great life work, Yours W. Mahoney, 10-12-27".⁶⁵ Peering through the spelling and faded ink, I realise this is probably Mary Gilmore's own copy of the book, initially a Christmas gift from William Maloney, a humanitarian and Victorian politician, who campaigned for women's rights and wore a Panama hat. He was friends with artist Tom Roberts who, according to Taylor, "drifted in occasionally to feast at the banquet of wit and jingles".⁶⁶ Mary is reminding me once more of her importance in Henry's story.

George outlines the purity of a true bohemian club:

Bohemian clubs are invariably started by poets, artists and other such impecunious personages, and in order that soul may commune with the soul alone, the Philistine is always debarred.

The poetic ones are so unpractical as to forget that it is the 'soulless Philistine' who keeps poetry and art alive by his purse. The absence of the detestable Philistine also deprives Bohemian clubs of the needful [pound], which explains why a Bohemian institution generally had a brief but merry life.⁶⁷

George continues:

The idea of the Dawn and Dusk club was hatched in the home of Fred Broomfield, 'the Ever-Merry' who was then sub-editor of *The Bulletin*.⁶⁸

⁶³ Victor Daley, *At Dawn and Dusk*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1898).

⁶⁴ Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991), 197.

⁶⁵ George A Taylor, *Those Were the Days: Being Reminiscences of Australian Artists and Writers*. (Sydney: Tyrells, 1918), n.p.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, 20-23.

⁶⁷ *ibid*.

⁶⁸ *ibid*.

It was a club composed of living or “material” and departed or “spiritual” Duskers. The Duskers were Victor Daley, Fred J. Broomfield, Henry Lawson, Jim Philp, C. Lindsay, Nelson Illingworth, Bertram Stevens, Frank Mahoney and George Taylor. A spiritual Dusker was elected by ballot at the beginning of every meeting and given a vacant chair for their guest spot. Among those elected on different nights were Shakespeare, Montaigne, Rabelais, Thackeray, Balzac and Aristophanes. George recalls that:

Some others were nominated, amongst whom were Virgil, Milton and Dr. Johnson, but though great men, they had not much humour to boast of, hence they were not eligible for membership. Ditto for Walt Whitman, Verlaine, Socrates and Beethoven. Byron came close: He was considered to have every qualification for membership but after a heated debate he was blackballed because of his selfishness.⁶⁹

George says the only other club worth joining was the “Sacred Six” artists’ club.⁷⁰ Its members sketched models and everyone was desperate to get into it; but you weren’t accepted without formal art training. Henry, before his writing career began, had done some coach painting in his youth, and had briefly returned to the trade in Perth; but George, a cartoonist and journalist, was proud to be one of the six who sketched the women he called “Bohemian Girls” after he had convinced the other artists of his talent by sketching plaster heads.

Reading this, I remember Hannah and Rose, posing for Nelson Illingworth and Norman Lindsay. They were bohemian girls, as was George’s favourite artist model at the club, Eve, who was “their high priestess”. He captures the artist model’s limited liberation when he reflects:

One night we made a discovery.

We found that Eve never went away alone. A girlfriend waited for her at the street door three storeys below, and they went home together. It was curious she could well trust herself alone when stripped but, when dressed, she was anxious to have the protection of another.⁷¹

Perhaps on those nights when George was sketching as one of the Sacred Six, Henry was home with Bertha, or on a binge with Victor Daley. During another excursion to the library, I find, amongst family papers and scraps of notes, a few typed draft pages mentioning the club from memoir notes by Bertha. She manages to hide her frustration with the infamy of it in *Memories*:

They were a group of bohemians – artists and writers – all poor. If they had money they shared it. If they had none, they would hold their meetings in a bar where they’d collect enough between them for a drink all round, and have a free counter lunch.⁷³

Years later, when attempting to secure a Commonwealth literary pension, Henry writes to a Dr. Watson, who was making enquiries into Henry’s personal life. Hoping to improve his chances, Henry tried to rectify the club’s reputation as “a band of boozy, bar bumming bards.”⁷⁴

We of the old literary *Bulletin* school in Australia never drank to anything near the extent they gave us credit for. The trouble was *we never hid it and, unfortunately,*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 20.

⁷³ Lawson, *Memories*, 107.

⁷⁴ Roderick, *Henry Lawson A Life*, 197.

seldom showed out or about except in intervals of drinking. At other times, we were working too hard, or always disinclined to visit. You speak about 'making enquiries into our cases'; but, Dr. Watson, we might have been 'drunkards,' as they called us, but we were never blackguards and we never dealt in lies, false pretences, or dishonesty.⁷⁵

* * *

I'm continually trying to match up names, dates, events and claims. Bertha says that as soon as they arrived back from New Zealand, she was preoccupied with their baby and so she left the "business affairs" to Henry. Their savings dwindled and:

It was here that I had my first experience of a bailiff – a stranger who knocked at the door and walked in. He sat in an easy chair and said he would wait...When he explained he was a bailiff put in on account of the rent, I was very distressed. Harry came home, sat down and had a yarn to him, and took him out for a drink and I don't know what he did with him, but he never came back.⁷⁶

For a time they moved in with Jack Lang and Bertha's sister, Hilda, at their home in Dulwich Hill. But Henry soon strained the relationship with the in-laws.

Jack Lang recalls that one Friday evening after he'd found Henry drunk with his mates, he'd bundled Henry into a cab home to Dulwich Hill. Henry, deciding the driver was too slow:

started to let him have it in good ripe Australian bush oaths. He became louder and louder. The driver... said he wouldn't go any further. I was in a real quandary. Finally we [the driver and Lang] compromised. I took out a huge bandanna handkerchief and gagged Henry for the rest of the journey. On arrival at Dulwich Hill, he was completely helpless. We thought he was dead. He was only dead drunk.⁷⁷

However, to Lang's astonishment, Henry composed a new poem somewhere between being put into bed at home after passing out in their cab and Lang seeing him the next morning at the breakfast table.

Dusker friend Fred Broomfield defends Lawson as a delight rather than a drunkard at this time, but they all seem equally drunk and delightful: "He [Henry] joyously took his place and his part among his fellows," Broomfield proclaimed and, rather than being a glum loner, Henry "had humour, quaint and twisted".⁷⁸

For all his quaint, twisted humour, Henry wasn't publishing that much. Archibald despaired of the state he was in, and the *Bulletin* staff were rejecting many of his pieces. One story, *The Sex Problem Again*, is obviously autobiographical and inspired by the continued tension in Henry's marriage. Henry writes:

He loved her and she loved him: but after they'd been married a while he found out that, although he understood her, she didn't and couldn't possibly ever understand him...He saw that his life would be a hell with her... But he couldn't leave her, because he loved her, and because he knew that she loved him and would break her heart if he left her.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Henry Lawson, Letter to Dr Frederick Watson, c. 1916, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 237.

⁷⁶ Lawson, *Memories*, 107.

⁷⁷ Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer*, 174. He cites the original source as Jack Lang, *I Remember*. (Sydney: Invincible, 1956).

⁷⁸ Fred Broomfield, 'Recollections of Henry Lawson,' in *Henry Lawson by His Mates*, ed. Bertha Lawson [Jago] and J Le Gay Brereton, 6.

⁷⁹ Henry Lawson, 'The Sex Problem Again,' in *The Children of the Bush*. (London: Methuen, 1902), 127–132.

I wonder if he wrote it hung over after an argument when he'd once more stumbled home – tobacco juice on his jaw, beer on his breath, and a head that hurt as his wife snapped and shouted at the state of him.

In November 1898, Henry entered Rest Haven on Sydney's tree-shaded North Shore. I find an article in the *Evening News*, written in 1896, under the heading, "Sydney's Temperance Sanatorium for Male Inebriates, A Visitor's Impressions".⁸⁰ In the article, the anonymous visitor writes that the sanatorium had been established five years earlier, for the cure of inebriates and dipsomaniacs.

The sanatorium was supervised by a "committee of ladies well-known in religious, social and temperance circles" and situated in "one of the most picturesque and secluded recesses of Middle Harbor [sic]...for all practical purposes it is located far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife". Rest Haven had orchards and gardens; the *Evening News* visitor encountered fourteen men, most of whom were "gentlemen of education and culture: there is a clergyman of holy orders, a doctor, a musician, a veterinary surgeon, a squatter, two gentlemen of independent means, the brother of a leading solicitor, besides one or two literary men".⁸¹

The visitor reflected, "Alcoholism is a nervous complaint and often concomitant with genius. It is rapidly coming to be recognised that the habitual abuse of stimulants is a disease, not a crime".⁸²

After six weeks of rehab, Henry, of nervous complaint concomitant with genius, emerged from Rest Haven, having decided he was a dipsomaniac rather than a classy drunk. He swore he would never drink again. I imagine Bertha holding him, thinking that they were now all the closer for the crisis that had beset them.

Henry writes a memoir of his rehab, *The Boozers' Home*, in which he blurred himself as one of his favourite characters, Mitchell. He writes that a drunkard was generally a man who:⁸³

seldom reforms at home ... the noblest wife in the world mostly goes the wrong way to work with a drunken husband – nearly everything she does is calculated to irritate him. If, for instance, he brings a bottle home from the pub, it shows that he wants to stay at home and not go back to the pub anymore; but the first thing the wife does is to get hold of the bottle and plant it, or smash it before his eyes, and that maddens him in the state he is in then.

Mitchell said that when relatives visited those who were in the boozers' home:

It shook the patients up a lot, but I reckon it did 'em good. There were well-bred old lady mothers in black, and hard-working, haggard wives and loving daughters – and the expressions of sympathy and faith and hope in those women's faces! My old mate said it was enough in itself to make a man swear off drink for ever...Ah, God – what a world it is!⁸⁴

I imagine Bertha's face, expressing sympathy, faith and hope.

⁸⁰ 'Rest Haven: Sydney's Temperance Sanatorium for Male Inebriates: A Visitor's Impressions,' in *Evening News*, 6 June, 1896, 5.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Henry Lawson, 'The Boozers' Home,' in *Children of the Bush*, 121-126.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

7.

I'm collecting photos. Bertha as a young mother in a double-buttoned dress primly holding her baby daughter, and then as matriarch in her backyard, as Louisa became. I find Victorian studio photos of Henry, first as an excited young man, then frailer but still with that distinctive moustache and those large brown eyes that were inherited by his daughter.

I take photos of Norman Lindsay's sketches of Archibald, of Lawson, and of Henry's Dawn and Dusk friends, Fred Broomfield and Victor Daley. I find a picture of an elegant George Robertson.

I print them out and pin them on a corkboard with the others I have collected online. They stare at me, inquisitively.

But there's a missing picture here. Hannah Thornburn. All that remains are fragments of her life in two of Henry's poems,⁸⁵ and a cryptic note from him many years later, asking Robertson to change "brown eyes" to grey in one of the verses of the first of these, adding, "I wonder how I made that mistake?"⁸⁶

Mary Gilmore insists to Henry's most prolific biographer, Colin Roderick, that Henry's poems about Ruth are actually Henry romanticising about Hannah. I find a picture of Hannah in Roderick's first biography of Henry, *The Real Henry Lawson*. The evidence she existed, he asserts, lies in an unpublished memoir Bert Stevens wrote in 1917, which detailed Hannah and Henry's friendship, if not something more.

Stevens writes:

The second child, Bertha, had been born in North Sydney a few months before they left for London (1900). I visited them several times around that time, & certainly thought the strain of sobriety was beginning to tell on Lawson. He found domestic affairs a burden and welcomed me as one upon whom he could unload his troubles. He had however found some solace in Hannah Thornburn. She was a rather delicate, plain girl, the daughter of a weak natured man who drank & was often out of employment. She was romantic: a poet of any kind would appeal to her and Lawson the Australian poet was regarded with something like worshipful admiration. She supplied the flattery and encouragement he did not get from his wife.⁸⁷

Was Hannah flesh to Henry – a real relationship that arose out of his frustration with sobriety and family? Or a friendly, sweet siren, who was just a fantasy of Henry's, like those other breasty models found in Norman Lindsay's paintings and Illingworth's sculptures, which are gazed upon by men imagining a different life? I think of Henry's story, *The Sex Problem Again*, and now I wonder if it refers not just to tension in his marriage, but to his conflict over whether to leave Bertha for Hannah.

I photograph the picture of Hannah and put it on my corkboard with Bertha. It's around this time that Bertha first met Mrs Byers, who would become integral to Henry's later life. I wish I could meet Mrs Byers, but instead I read through her recollections, recorded by Aubrey Curtis and now lodged in the Mitchell Library. Her ghost is sincere, and clear. I imagine her having a cup of tea with me.

She is more tolerant than Bertha, but then she didn't have a child and another pregnancy to contend

⁸⁵ Lawson, 'Hannah Thornburn'; Henry Lawson, 'To Hannah,' in *The Bulletin*, 1 September, 1904, 3.

⁸⁶ Henry Lawson, Letter to George Robertson, 9 February, 1917, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 271.

⁸⁷ Stevens, *Henry Lawson*.

with, which pushed Bertha's tolerance to tiredness and then exhaustion. There's a separation in Mrs Byers' past too but I wonder if, like Henry's mother, Louisa, neither of these older women could quite face the ignominy of legal separation and divorce, which generated so much daily news in the papers. The Lawsons lived with her, it seems, after Henry sobered up and they'd moved across the harbour to the North Shore, which perhaps Bertha felt was further away from his bohemian club. Then they moved to a North Sydney cottage near the police station, where their daughter, Bertha Louisa, was born in February 1900:

"It is just about twenty one years since Henry Lawson came to my place, the North Sydney Coffee Palace," Mrs Byers told Curtis. He was coaxing out of her recollections from years before:

It was one Sunday afternoon, I remember, that he and his wife with the little baby, Jim – a baby in arms – came in and had afternoon tea. When they had gone out my little niece, who had waited on them, told me they had asked if we had furnished apartments to let. So my little niece ran after them and they came back and took a flat. I have often thought since how much is left to chance. But for the smartness of my niece in telling me and running after them, I might never have known Henry Lawson...

I did not see very much of him except when he went in and out of the Coffee Palace and when he came to pay me at the end of the week for the flat. He always paid me in gold. He was wrapped up in the works he was composing and was mostly writing. After a few months at 'the Palace' they left and took a cottage, not far from my place. They were busy in connection with their trip to England. This trip unfortunately for Henry brought him great trouble, some of the trouble I heard of while he was there, but many rumours were untrue, and Henry has told me of it since.⁸⁸

* * *

In the Art Gallery of NSW, there is the portrait of Henry by John Longstaff, commissioned by *The Bulletin*. The boat that was taking the Lawsons to London, the *Damascus*, stopped first in Melbourne, where Henry spent the day with Longstaff in his Melbourne studio while his toddler, Jim, ran around the painter.

I read that the portrait sitting took seven hours, with an hour for lunch. Henry wore his 50-shilling suit that he had bought for London and fussed about the cuffs of his shirt, but Longstaff painted them out.

Henry recalls in an article that he called "The Longstaff Portrait" in 1910:

I was already a worshipper of Longstaff because of his picture, 'Breaking the News.' I found him, as I'd vaguely expected, a big Australian – or rather Victorian (Gippsland, I think) – in every sense of the word...

Longstaff quickly arranged 'the pose' (If I ever posed) and we had two or three hours at it, that morning. I think I could still watch that man work all day...Then at it again, after lunch...

The sittings went on without interruption except once or twice; when Jim requested to be retired, and again, when he was making arrangements to fix himself comfortably for a quiet doss in the corner of the studio and got mixed up with a screen. He didn't complain even then. He was a quiet child...

Next day was a strenuous day – for Longstaff. I think a professional photographer came in and took shots of me from all sides dodging behind Longstaff's easel and all around, over Jim and behind the screen to help Longstaff when I should be gone. I was sailing the next day.

⁸⁸ 'Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers,' ed. Curtis.

I had for years and have now – and I don't know how I got it – an idea that John Longstaff never knew that the picture was *finished*. He called it, 'a quick sketch in oils'. I've only ever seen it twice – once when it was wet and once when I returned from England in 1902. Perhaps the reason I've never seen it since is that it is, in a way, connected with the tragedy of my life.⁸⁹

On a visit to the Art Gallery of NSW to see the Picasso exhibition, I'm accompanied by my reluctant daughter Ruby. Afterwards, we wander around the rooms of Australian artworks framed in elaborate gold to emphasise their importance. We pause in front of the Longstaff portrait. Henry looks dignified but excited. He's on the verge. London is calling.

"This is the writer I'm researching," I explain to Ruby. I try to tell her about my writing, my work, to make it more tangible to her. "His name is Henry Lawson".

She scrutinises the picture: "His moustache looks like a squirrel".

* * *

Somewhere in the background, on that day when Henry's portrait was being painted, there is Bertha and their second baby. Maybe she is visiting her brother. Or maybe she is rushing around buying essentials for the weeks at sea ahead. She says that the artist and Henry had to clean Jim up before he was brought back home to her, because the little boy was covered in paint.

She is indulgent, proud, happy and forgiving of Henry as they prepared for London. Bertha writes:⁹⁰

For Harry was, above all things loyal, affectionate, warm-hearted and deeply sincere. He was always greatly troubled at our difficulties, and with each decision that we made, each new venture that we tried, he would be as eager and excited as a boy. He would fling himself into it with immense energy and enthusiasm, and his discouragement would be profound when things did not turn out as we hoped they would.

Especially with regard to London. Henry, Bertha recalls:

had a letter from Lord Beauchamp, then Governor of New South Wales, in 1899 asking him to call and see him. It was written after Lord Beauchamp had been on a trip outback. He had also read Harry's books and recognised his genius.

He was distressed about how little writers were paid in Australia and advised Henry to go to London. He [Lord Beauchamp] offered to pay our passages to England, so that Harry should win full recognition for his work. Without thinking of the difficulties of travelling with young children, Harry accepted the offer on the spot and came home radiant and jubilant, to think that at last he would get a firm foothold on the literary ladder.

He laughed about my fears about travelling with a family, and we sailed in the *Damascus* early in 1900, when my baby Bertha was only two months old, and duly arrived in London.⁹¹

* * *

When Henry's intention to go to London was announced, the Duskers reunited for one last party together.

⁸⁹ Henry Lawson, 'The Longstaff Portrait,' in *Henry Lawson: A Campfire Yarn*, ed. Leonard Cronin, vol. 2. (Sydney: Redwood, 2000), 926.

⁹⁰ Lawson, *Memories*, 103.

⁹¹ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 72.

They would also farewell English artist A.H Fullwood, who was returning home to England around the same time. Fred Broomfield recounts, “Bohemia in Sydney determined that the joint send-off should be a memorable one”.⁹²

He wants to show a different Lawson, one who was still regarded as a Sydney celebrity: “the gathering was so huge that it was by sheer good luck that anyone escaped death by suffocation in the fierce struggle for admission”.⁹³

Broomfield recalls that the farewell, at the Victoria Café, ended with “terrific midnight yells” at the ferry wharf, where Lawson walked under a double arch of “walking sticks, umbrellas, temporarily purloined palings” onto a “shriekingly impatient boat”⁹⁴ to take him home to Bertha across the harbour in North Sydney.

On April 20, 1900, the day of the sailing to England, the Duskers returned to wave off Henry once more. They stuffed a dashed-off poem from Victor Daley into the breast pocket of the captain of the *Damascus* and then “adjourned to the Lord Nelson hotel for five or ten minutes...we were there four and a half hours, awaiting the last siren”.⁹⁵

Henry later writes a poem about the send-off, *For He Was a Jolly Good Fellow*. In the poem a woman stands apart from the whooping Duskers, her grey eyes staring at the boat:

They cheered from cargo ways and ballast heap and pile,
To last him all his days – they sent him off in style.
(He only took his book.) He only turned his head
In one last hopeless look towards a cargo shed
Where one stood brimming-eyed in silence by the wall –
No jealous eyes espied that last farewell of all⁹⁶

The siren of London called.

⁹² Broomfield, ‘Recollections of Henry Lawson,’ 66.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Henry Lawson, ‘For He Was a Jolly Good Fellow,’ in *Henry Lawson: A Campfire Yarn*, ed. Leonard Cronin, vol. 2. (Sydney: Redwood, 2000), 338.

8.

Letter of July 30, 1900 from Bertha Lawson, then living at Spring Villa, Cowper Road, Harpenden, Hertfordshire:⁹⁷

Dear Mother,

I sat up nearly all night writing to you about a month ago, whether the letter was ever posted, we don't know. Harry can't remember posting it and I'm sure I didn't. For next day poor little Bertha was seriously ill with bronchitis and colic and for four days and nights I did not know what sleep meant...Jim is a shadow of himself, a poor miserable whining child. It is his teeth again, he is cutting his four year old teeth together...I do hope they will be strong again before the cold weather sets in...

We get very little time to feel lonely – but seldom talk of Sydney – for tears and lumps in my throat are my trouble and Harry is as miserable as a bandicoot for days. Oh I shall be glad when we can get back again. 'But we are not coming back hard up' and we are certain of success.

I don't like the climate a scrap – it's blazing hot one day and miserably cold the next. The winter is a real Bogey to us. How we are going to live through it I don't know. If Harry makes a splash we'll go to Italy or the South of France.

Dear Mother, I do wish you'll write soon. We crave for news from Australia. I do hope Hilda is over her trouble alright and that the newcomer is a son. Ask her to write too for I will write to her as soon as I can.

I better get to bed. I wouldn't go to sleep until this was written or I would lose Wednesday's mail. If you should see any of our friends tell them we are getting on famously and Harry will write to all as soon as he gets this rush of work off...

Australia seems a dead world to the people here. There is no news in the English papers of it worth reading so if you can spare a paper occasionally we would be so thankful. I do hope you are doing better and things are brighter in the shop now. If you should see Miss Scott [Sydney feminist, Rose Scott] give her our kindest regards. I will write to her as soon as possible.

Give all our family my love. Love and best wishes to your own dear self.

Your affectionate daughter,
Bertha

I admire Bertha's courage in moving so far so soon after her second child's birth. When Ruby's father and I went to London, we were still a just-married couple; we carried a backpack squashed with warm clothes rather than a baby in arms. But Bertha had two, one just born. They were a family.

Henry writes to George Robertson after the voyage, "Wife and youngsters alright but had a hard time".⁹⁸ The journey seems to have been difficult, even before they'd left the Australian coast. As they were departing Fremantle and entering Cockburn Sound, Henry managed to dash off one last letter to the *Australian Star*:

Just going into the Sound. We go out in the morning so I've just got time for a line. Beastly rough passage across the Bight. Captain McKilliam is a grand fellow; sticking to me like a toff. We are very comfortable. A great crowd on board and oceans of 'copy.' Have a large, four berth cabin, plenty of room. The doctor is an old reader of mine – there are many of them aboard. Decent crowd. Good Food. Kind regards to the boys. Goodbye, and God Bless you all.
Yours all alive, Henry Lawson⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Bertha McNamara, 30 July, 1900, in Lawson Family Papers 1896–1968, MLMSS 7692 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

⁹⁸ Henry Lawson, Letter to George Robertson, c. August, 1900, in *Henry Lawson Letters 1890-1922*, ed. Colin Roderick. (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1972), 127.

⁹⁹ Henry Lawson, Letter to *The Australian Star*, April 1900, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890-1922*, ed. Roderick, 126.

It was beastly, Bertha says, especially when they arrived in London. Although it was summer, she saw London through a “grey, drizzling mist”.¹⁰⁰ On the suggestion of their friend Mrs Dean, they move to Harpenden, a village north of London, which she feels is more conducive to family life and less to drinking. She tries to settle in once the children recovered from their bronchitis, and to adjust to her new surroundings and culture. The class-consciousness of the village is a shock after their experience of bohemian political and literary circles in Sydney.

I feel that she saw herself now less as Henry’s muse and more as his manager, with his agent, JB Pinker in London, to do the actual deals for his work. Or perhaps that’s the image she wanted to portray, rather than the truth that she confides to her mother in her letter. *Tell them at home we are getting on famously*, she instructs her mother to say if she saw their friends in Sydney. She learns quickly that it is important to look respectable and act affluent even when, behind the closed cottage door, you are struggling. Fake it until you make it. We all do, don’t we? Bertha recalls in *Memories*:

From our kitchen door we looked out over beautiful hayfields bordered with tall English trees. We loved to wander down the leafy lanes, and Harry was immensely interested in all the little farms, so different from far-away Australia and the bush. The little village was a haven of peace and comfort after our wanderings... Success came quickly. Orders for work arrived even from magazines in America. Blackwood’s made him an offer for a new book. Mr JB Pinker (a fine man and our excellent friend) was Harry’s literary agent... It was delightful to live in a spot that was so happy and healthy for the babies and we began to think that England was not the land of gloomy skies that had been painted. But, inevitably, Harry was drawn back into the life of London. His business necessarily took him into the city and he could not have avoided receptions and functions and the joyous meeting of old and new friends. And so Bohemia, with its trials and temptations, claimed him again.¹⁰¹

* * *

Letter from Bertha Lawson to her mother, Mrs McNamara, from Spring Villa, Cowper Rd, Harpenden, Hertfordshire, England, September 11, 1900:¹⁰²

Dearest Mother,
Your loving letter to hand. I was glad to know Hilda was over her trouble and that the baby was such a strong child. I wrote to [relatives in] Germany on receiving your letter. I would like to go to Germany but we have only very little cash and I’m afraid it will be sometime before we could manage it.
Both Jim and Bertha are much better. Bertha is a little mite. She is very stout but does not grow, at least I can’t see it. Jim is so tall and is at an interesting age. Harry is devoted to Bertha - will nurse and play with her much more than he will with Jim. Jim calls me little muver [mother].
Bertha is a good little darling and she is pretty. Her eyes are beautiful. I wish we could afford to have her photo taken. We are having a struggle but I hope soon it will be over. Blackwoods magazine has accepted a story of Harry’s and “Black and

¹⁰⁰ Lawson, *Memories*, 111.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 113–114.

¹⁰² Bertha Lawson, Letter to Bertha McNamara, 11 September, 1900, in Lawson Family Papers 1896–1968, MLMSS 7692 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

White” has accepted one also – if we can only get fairly started before the winter we’ll be alright. Everything is very dear, coal included.

We have settled our doctors bill. I couldn’t count all the visits and medicines included only cost £1-3-1. So Drs fees are not heavy. I have a girl to take the children out for me and I do all the housework myself. I pay the girl 2/6 a week, so now I have a little time to mend and sew.

The weather has been very cold. I have put double clothing on the children. They are both wearing woollen shirts each. I don’t know how we are going to stand the winter. I am so sorry things are so bad with you and hope the Summer will make things brighter. Do write to us when you have some time for I’m wretchedly lonely. Mrs. Dean has gone to Jersey on holiday.

I’d give worlds to be back in Sydney. England is a grey, cold place. I’m sure we’ll never get acclimatised and the weeks of grey sky are so depressing. We feel we are fighting a big battle and hope to come off successful.

If you see Mrs Schaebel, give her my love and tell her I will write by this mail if possible, with babies it is work, work all the time and when we have to economise in every little thing, it is slavery. Harry has only sold two stories so far.

Now dear Mother, I must say good night. I’m afraid I have the blues tonight. So if this letter is doleful don’t take any notice of it. Give my love to all and tell me about yourself when you write. Tell Hilda Harry and I send Jack and her our congratulations. I will write to her myself shortly. Love to the boys and kisses for Willie and Alice¹⁰³ and remember us to Mr Mac.

Good night,

From your affectionate daughter Bertha

* * *

I receive an unexpected offer from my partner to visit London, to research Bertha and Henry’s life there. I’m hesitant to leave Ruby; her dad is overseas too. Her 20-year-old cousin offers to move in for the week to look after her. I am grateful for family yet again; they surround Ruby with security and support.

“Go,” Ruby urges. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry”.

I think about how she is used to one parent or both of them being on planes somewhere in the world. I feel she is always left behind. Left for work, left for a date, left for a trip to London. Left by her dad.

So I go, promising presents. I haven’t been back since I lived there seven years ago with Daniel, soon after we’d married. There are undulating flashbacks of grasping strawberries and daisies on the first day of spring. Feeling the depth of the darkness in winter and sighing at its watery sky. Swimming at Hampstead Heath in summer, kicking cautiously in the bracken water, unable to shake my Australian fear that all brown water is dangerous because of what may lie beneath with teeth.

I try to remember what I was like in London then. I know I worked at “Crumpet Tower,” the cabbies’ nickname for IPC Magazines because it was filled with women. I know most days I was desperate for a walk on the Heath. We lived in a tiny attic flat above a little off-licence shop that looked over rooftops, and I hunted around the lanes of Chinatown so I could make a Thai meal. I remember making friends, but never feeling at home until we returned to Sydney a year later.

I know I was happier in Spain, when we visited my father-in-law there. I remember arriving in the early hours at Benidorm, a beach town invaded by British tourists, and making love with the sounds of shrieks

¹⁰³ Bertha’s younger siblings, born from her mother’s marriage to William McNamara.

from the pool drifting into our room. I remember squinting because the sunlight was so bright in the taxi that sped beside orange groves into the country.

We stopped at a white villa, La Giraffe, where Dan's father, an old bohemian pianist, and an artist friend spent much of the year. The plunge pool was shaded by olive groves, and the morning sun made long shadows on the terrace. We woke up warm and made love under a fan. It felt like home. Somewhere in a box there are photos of me smiling in a little blue denim dress. They are lost, like the past.

"What was I like in London?" I ask Dan before I get on the plane this time. After a decade of being a five-star gypsy playing piano on cruise ships, he is living in Los Angeles and is temporarily accessible. "I don't think it suited me. I was such a water baby".

"We walked everywhere," he says. "And yeah, if you aren't used to it, the cold, and the early dark days...I think it got to you".

"You were so tired," he continues. "You'd come home and want to go to bed. It was so long ago. God. Seventeen years".

We share a history and a daughter. Divorce can't take that away.

* * *

Letter dated July 18, 1900 but thought to be 1901, from Bertha Lawson to her mother, Bertha McNamara. Written from Shepperton in Middlesex, where her children were living while she was incapacitated.¹⁰⁴

Dearest Mother,

I was delighted to receive your letter. For I felt you had not forgotten me and glad you dropped it in the mud, for I now have a little bit of Sydney soil to cherish.

How sorry I am you have been kept in such suspense. Believe me, Harry did it out of kindness to your feelings.

Mother, I've been dreadfully ill, or else you would have had a letter from me. It is only within the last month that I've been able to write at all, and as you see I'm a little shaky still.

Do not blame Harry, whatever you do. He has been the best and most considerate Husband that ever lived and I were only half the good woman as he a man, I'd be self-satisfied. No, the fault was entirely mine. I have had too much responsibility for my years. You know what high pressure we had in Sydney, especially when Harry drank so heavily and then moving about so much, and the birth of the little ones and the journey home [to England] finished me. An engine will only go a certain time and then will want repairing, and we mortals are the same.

Never mind, I fought the drink fiend successfully and have done other things that people twice my age would not attempt and I mean to fight this, the voices and all the other frightful nightmare of this disease, have vanished and I hope soon to be able to sleep naturally – I'm sick of sleeping draughts.

Now for something pleasant. Harry will make a big hit here, if only he keeps well physically. Oh, he has got so thin with the worry and trouble of this unfortunate illness. I expect to be soon home now and I'll fatten him up. Bertha has cut her teeth and Jim is in knickers though I have not seen him. Poor little mites, Harry has a kind, motherly old woman looking after everything but all the same it is not like a mother. If Harry had been wise, he would have sent me to a government institution instead of keeping me in a private place and paying three guineas a week for me...

¹⁰⁴ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Bertha McNamara, 18 July, 1900 (but thought to be 1901), in Lawson Family Papers 1896–1968, MLMSS 7692 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

Mother they drove me mad where I was before, well you understand more than I can tell you.

We have never heard of this beautiful hospital or I should have been here in the beginning. From the week I entered I've been feeling well I expect to be home shortly...

This is our home address as I hope to be there soon – will not give you my present one.

There is no signature on this letter – I'm not sure if there are pages that have got lost or she just came to an abrupt, vulnerable end.

* * *

I'm reading about Bertha's hospitalisation in England. Voices. She thinks she's killed the children. I imagine her hunched in the cottage. According to the doctor's diagnosis, she is suffering from "worry". I think of how soon after the birth of her second baby they left Sydney. The long, rough, "dreadful" voyage. The English winter, after years of light and heat. Excitement of the new is gradually eroded by everyday living. Long summer days reduce to long dark mornings and nights. Children pale from bronchitis.

And for Bertha dreams malign into hallucinations.

9.

Letter from Mrs Edith Dean, [the Australian widow of the radical poet Francis Adams], October 1900:¹⁰⁵

Dear Mr. Archibald,

I know you will be dreadfully shocked to hear that poor Mrs. Lawson has gone mad – driven so, I have no hesitation in saying, by her brutal husband. He has been drinking heavily and I quite expect the shock of him taking to drink again has completely turned her brain...

Three weeks ago my husband and I left home for a holiday leaving a servant here. On our return we find Mrs Lawson in the County Lunatic Asylum and Lawson in lodgings with my servant and the children in London...I am troubled as to what Mrs. Lawson is to do when she comes out. Do you know her mother's address? I believe too she has a brother in Melbourne who is well off and I wish you would let her people know - Lawson is such an unmitigated liar that I don't trust him.

Gossip travels too, and it emerged in the papers. *The Truth* writes:

Pessimistic Lawson is here, buried in a dull, London flat, all alone. His wife craved and longed for the sunshine of her native Australia and is now in a mad-house while her husband wanders alone and lives, nobody knows how.¹⁰⁶

Also, as Mrs Dean infers, rumours were circulating that Henry had taken up with Mrs Dean's servant, Lizzie Humphrey, while Bertha was locked away. But Lawson's flatmate at this time, the Australian poet Arthur Maquarie, defends Henry to Archibald and claims that Mrs Dean is being malicious by implying Henry is the problem. "While his name was being blackened to you, he and I were living quietly up the Thames," Maquarie counter-writes. As for Bertha, he adds, "her family are all shut up from time to time. There's fancy names for the malady but only one word for it – heredity".¹⁰⁷

The Bulletin also attempts to counter the gossip, reporting loyally that "Lawson has had a terrible time (wife ill, & etc.) and has come out of it like a strong man. He is doing well and has paid off the £200 advanced him by his literary agent during his wife's illness".¹⁰⁸

I keep trying to balance the truth against the counter-truths. Allies bristle and defend. They clash over the facts. I try to track the movements as Henry deals with his family crisis. Their son, Jim, was boarded with a lady in the village of Charlton, in Shepperton, Middlesex, not far from London and bordered by the Thames. Henry moved back to London into a flat with the servant and with his flatmate Maquarie (whom Mrs Dean calls a "ne'er do well") and, according to census records, their baby daughter lived there too, at least initially. This makes sense, as Bertha was hospitalised in London.

I go back to the indignant letter about Henry's domestic arrangements from Mrs Dean to Archibald. It makes sense that he would take a maid to help with the children. Henry was such a romantic that, if he did have any relationship with the maligned Lizzie, it mustn't have been serious because, unlike with Bertha and Hannah, there's no legacy of lyrical poetry or prose idealising her existence, apart from a curious character

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Meg Tasker and Lucy Sussex, "'That Wild Run to London': Henry and Bertha Lawson in England," *Australian Literary Studies*, 23, no.2 (2007), 173.

¹⁰⁶ Maude Wheeler, 'The Lights of London,' *Truth*, 28 April 1901, 8.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 175. Tasker and Sussex cite 'Red Page,' in *The Bulletin*, 24 May, 1902.

reference to her in *Triangles of Life*.¹⁰⁹ Lizzie washes away in the complicated story of Henry and Bertha, like the London rain they lived in.

But at some point over the following months Henry moved to a cottage in the Shepperton area. It was from here that Bertha writes her letters in 1901, just before and after she was discharged. It's messy and confusing, like all family crises involving mental illness are.

This much is clear: Bertha was first hospitalised in October 1900, at Bethnal House, London, just a month after she writes a letter to her mother saying she "has the blues" from their Harpenden cottage. In May 1901, she was admitted for further treatment to Bethlem Royal Hospital, nicknamed Bedlam, at St George's Fields, London, where she was patient 2616.¹¹⁰ Her period of treatment at both institutions was for a total of ten months.

Her initial admission notes at Bethlem, recorded in its Register of Patients in black and red ink, state: "Melancholia with ideas of unworthiness. Hallucination of hearing + suicidal tendencies".¹¹¹

The person "by whom authority sent" is listed initially as Henry Lawson, with a deposit of ten pounds, so, while the hospital had room for impoverished patients, Australian writers' wives were asked to pay.

The certifying doctor at Bethlem recorded:

She sat hiding her face in her hands and was most taciturn. She said 'I did it' over and over again, but would not state what. Stated she had no feeling anywhere, said she had killed both her children. Testimony by Florence Pope, a mental nurse in attendance at 123 Bond St London: tells me Mrs. Lawson hears voices. Supposed nurse to be the devil. Unable to fix attention on anything. Her husband Henry Lawson tells me his wife attempted to get out of the upstairs window. Has begged him to kill her or give her the means to kill herself.¹¹²

Mother, she writes, I have the blues.

* * *

An abridged version of a letter of November 2, 1901 from Bertha Lawson, Charlton, Shepperton, Middlesex:¹¹³

Mother,

I'm writing to wish you all a very merry Christmas and a happy new year. Thank you very much for your loving letter, and don't worry about me, I mean to take care of myself in the future. We are all in splendid health but oh it is cold. I'm writing by a blazing fire and have a thick jacket on and I'm still not warm. The fog is thick, you cannot see a dozen yards ahead. I do so sincerely hope this will be our last winter in England...

Bertha and Jim are fat and roly. You would love the kiddies, they are so good. Jim is a very tall boy full of life and fun and Bertha is a pretty child. We'll get our photos taken as soon as we can afford it and I'll send one out. We were hoping we could send one to you [for Christmas].

It is still the same old struggle – but I think it will soon be over. Harry's new book will be out on the fifteenth. The country is looking desolate, all the leaves are falling and everything is bare, if we can raise the money we'll try and get to London for the

¹⁰⁹ Henry Lawson, 'Triangles of Life,' in *Triangles of Life and Other Stories*. (Melbourne: Standard Publishing, 1913).

¹¹⁰ Bethlem Royal Hospital, patient admission and casebooks 1683–1932, London.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Tasker and Sussex, 'That Wild Run to London', 172.

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Bertha McNamara, 2 November, 1901, in Lawson Family Papers, 1896-1968, MLMSS_7682 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

winter. One would go melancholy here. I've had both children vaccinated last Thursday, small pox is raging and the authorities are waking up...

Harry is truly fond of the children. He's been at it this afternoon making a train for Jim...

I hear several Australians are home, or coming. Louise Mac [*Bulletin* writer Louise Mack] ... I wonder if she has left her husband (the barrister). He was a drunken beast – I don't blame her if she has.

I wrote a long letter to Miss Scott over a year ago but never had an answer. How is Hilda and the family? I will write to them all but afraid I'll not have enough cash for postage to post all this mail so if they do not get their letters for Christmas give them my love and best wishes. How I wish we were spending Christmas together – we are lonely. I haven't a single friend. We never have a visitor, so unlike Sydney times.

We both feel sure of success but literary work goes slowly. I think after this year, the pinch will be over. Harry is fortunate in having a splendid agent, he charges ten percent but when I was ill he advanced Harry sixty pounds so he must feel confident of him and his work.

Dearest mother, I wish you and Harry would meet, and I'm sure all the bitterness would be past. He never got the letter you wrote to Harpenden and kept putting off telling you the bad news in the hope there would be a change in my condition.

As far as the slander you heard, there was not a shade of truth in them – Harry is, and is doing all in his power to make me happy and to atone for the drinking days.

Do you see anything of Angus and Robertson? They promised to send a cheque but never did so. It would be very acceptable at the present time. If you should see Bert Stevens give him our best wishes, tell him Harry will write to them all some day.

...It is only sometimes I realise the distance between us and then my heart nearly aches in two. These are the days that make us homesick. Look out our front window and there's nothing but a thick sheet of fog through which you cannot see a yard, and go into the kitchen and it is full of clothes drying on the lines – I'm heartily sick of it – and the English are like their climate – as cold and as false as possible – and the talk of war is sickening. I will send you a book, 'Peace or War in South Africa' it is a grand little book, setting forth the truth of the whole concern.

They are having a great do in London, welcoming home the Duke and Duchess, spending money in the thousands to decorate the streets. London is rotten as far as society and politics go.

Dear Mother I shall have to say good night. Harry is waiting for the pen. Again wishing you every joy and blessing for the New Year and with fondest love to you all from the family and
your loving daughter

Bertha

I'm not sending any cards this Christmas – can't afford it. I'll do my best to get our photos taken for you.

The Bethlem Hospital Bertha knew is now the Imperial War Museum. The gardens, damp and green from perennial rain, teem with tourists photographing the naval guns and a segment of the Berlin Wall.

Inside, vintage fighter planes hang from the ceiling as marching songs and rolling newsreels blare commentary of battles and victory. I'm not sure what to expect of its former life as Bertha's asylum, given its notorious nickname Bedlam, which conjures up its older history – manacles and, in the late 18th century, "lunatic baiting" which encouraged the sane to ogle the insane for a fee.

In the War Museum's library, I am relieved to read that by the time Bertha was hospitalised in 1901, Bethlem practised dignity rather than tragedy tourism, and straitjackets were removed upon admittance. The hell house for the ill and poor had become a refuge for the middle class needing rest. A wall protected the patients' privacy. A Minister of Religion had to bear witness to mental illness before anyone could have their spouse or relatives admitted, to protect against claims of insanity that were really claims for inheritance or remarriage.

As today, the windows were large, with a view to the winter trees that are desolate and delicate like the patients who were once inside here. The galleries were decorated with ferns, birdcages, flowers and fishbowls; etchings of the hospital at the time depict women tending their needlework and cats curled up beside others with lost faces. Residents ate meat, vegetables and pudding; the pharmaceutical remedies available included amyl nitrate for melancholy. Archival descriptions, recorded by writers who visited Bethlem in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, confirm Bertha's letters to her mother about her treatment.

Bertha's admission is highlighted in a Bethlem heritage blog that boasts the relatives of famous people who have been admitted. She is listed alongside the mother of the artist J.W Turner and the niece of the slave trader turned evangelist John Newton:¹¹⁴

Bethlem Hospital was relocated, reformed and changed beyond recognition in the course of the century that followed the admission of Mary Turner and Elizabeth Catlett. By 1904, the London *Argus* could opine that its arrangements were 'not so much those of an asylum or a hospital as of a first-class hotel'. Into this institution stepped a patient on transfer from the privately-run Bethnal House in May 1901, one Bertha Lawson, then wife of the Australian poet Henry Lawson. The pair had come to London with their two young children in the hope that they could make their living by Henry's pen.

The blog doesn't mention Bertha's escape attempt soon after admission, which Mary Gilmore records in her unpublished memoir and which she claims Henry related to her in confidence:

She had climbed a twenty-foot wall by means of a gas pipe, and reaching the Thames, started to swim across. A policeman, not knowing she was a good swimmer, jumped in to save her. He could not swim and she nearly drowned him. He contracted pneumonia and Henry had to pay his expenses besides giving him five pound for saving her life.¹¹⁵

I imagine Bertha making strong, sure and swift strokes in the river, with the cold current shocking her senses. I wonder if she was having a psychotic episode at the time, and saw a too-bright sky and gas lamps on the bank glowing like fireballs. Or perhaps she was frightened, but sure of her sanity. I imagine her struggling with the brave, weaker policeman. I wonder if she was swimming to the opposite shore – to her children, or to Australia. I imagine the policeman forgetting propriety and grabbing her around her waist, her breasts, her legs, anywhere to keep hold of her thrashing body, shouting for help. Someone must have come, or Bertha must have given up, because she returned to Bethlem and became a quiet, lost face.

Mother, I've been dreadfully ill.

* * *

Maybe my tan gives me away as not being a local as I've plunged from a Sydney summer to London in the January new year. On a drizzling misty morning I'm scrutinising a North London bus map near where I'm staying.

¹¹⁴ Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum, 'In the Spotlight: Relatives 2,' (blog), posted August 22, 2011, accessed March 30, 2017, <https://bethlemheritage.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/in-the-spotlight-relatives-2/>.

¹¹⁵ Gilmore, 'Personal History: Henry Lawson and I,' 16.

An elderly lady asks, "Where do you need to go?"

"I need Market Road," I explain.

"Not far," she says. "What are you seeing?"

How do you explain you are trying to find the last known address in England of a dead Australian poet and his fragile wife?

"I'm seeing someone," I reply.

The bus drives past housing estates and graffitied sports fields. There's no Georgian grandeur here, just streets that are drab and damp. Washing that will never dry hangs on balconies; cheap lace curtains line the windows of bland brown brick terraces. A man shuffles to the disability centre as another yells at the rain. Pigeons flock around the corner of the park and mothers push strollers covered in plastic to the play centre. More brown units obscure the view of the park.

At the back of the play centre I find Paradise Row, the lane in which Henry and Bertha lived during their last months in London. Overgrown fences back onto the lane, separating aged, white buildings that look to have never changed. But who really knows in a city that changes all the time? One fence gate opens onto a building site. The lane is much prettier and more private than the other streets around here. There's no "Henry Lived Here" blue plaque from London Heritage, like on the homes of many other writers who lived in London. But, compared to the neighbourhood, it's paradise.

A tube stop away is Gray's Inn Road, where Henry first lived with his "ne'er do well" friend Arthur Maquarie, and the servant Lizzie Humphrey (the slander! the gossip!) in Clovelly Mansions. Today it is London live – a hub of shops, traffic and people.

Henry, I imagine, would have felt comfortable in the middle of it. A London local. "A literary lion," as Bertha calls him. Charles Dickens' museum is around the corner and, next to a sprawling modern silver office building, mansion apartments still stand like the elegant old lady next door.

I walk around looking for Henry's old apartment, in yet another search for ghosts. Construction workers smile at me and follow my gaze as I look up, searching for any reference to his former place of lodging. But the name Clovelly Mansions seems to have vanished, bar an internet reference to the fact that Katherine Mansfield, the great New Zealand-born short story writer, lived there a decade later, in 1911.

I ask at the local library about the mansions. I'm wondering why Henry chose here, rather than another part of London. It was reasonably close to Bloomsbury though.

"Was it fashionable to live here?" I ask. "Or grungy?"

"More grungy," the librarian replies. "It's not Virginia Woolf".

"Dodgy Bloomsbury?" I offer.

"Yes," he says.

10.

Letter to David Scott Mitchell dated February 11, 1902 from Henry Lawson, writing from the office of his agent, J.B. Pinker at Effingham House, Arundel Street, Strand, London:¹¹⁶

Dear Mr. Mitchell,
Have had a bad time since I wrote last, and Mrs. Lawson has had a long and severe illness – however things look bright again.
...It takes about two years good work to get a footing in London – *but good work will go in the end*. I expect to be well on my feet this year and hope to take Mrs. Lawson out to Australia before next winter. But of course I'll return to London.
...I would have been in a comfortable position but for the heavy expenses of Mrs. Lawson's illness.
...Of course I've heard all about the cowardly stories that were circulated concerning me in Sydney. The origin of those lies is too paltry and contemptible for me to explain. I dare say Miss Scott knows the truth by this time. These are lies that a man cannot fight. But I might tell you some things some days. But what does it matter? Mrs. Lawson and the children are blooming. Please remember me to Miss Scott. I heard she was one of the few friends who remained true to me.
Yours ever gratefully,
Henry Lawson.

* * *

I go back to Bertha's memoir for clues about her state of mind. She doesn't mention her illness in England at all, only the distress of poverty. Her voice is calm, confident and controlled. It's the same tone as in the letter to her mother once she's feeling better.

As she had anticipated, after she was discharged from Bethlem she joined Henry and the children in Shepperton. They then moved back to London for the winter and took a small flat up five flights of stairs in Paradise Row. Lizzie has disappeared except for Bertha's reference to rumours in her letter to her mother: "As far as the slander you heard, there was not a shade of truth in them". The rumours had circulated around the globe to Australia and back to Bertha in London. A gulf stream of gossip.

In spring 1902, the London winter was warming; but there were still late frosts. Mary Gilmore wrote to Henry with the news that she, together with her husband Will and their son Billy, were in Liverpool; they were en route from Paraguay to Sydney. Henry and Bertha telegraphed, urging them to come and stay at the London flat.

The spring frosts reflect the atmosphere that quickly develops in the flat between Mary and Bertha, who had never previously met. Twenty years later, Mary recalls this time in her unpublished mini-memoir, *Personal History, Henry Lawson and I*. Reading it, I can see why it wasn't published at the time and Mary has marked it "personal and private". Bertha would have sued.

When we arrived at the flat it was a little earlier in the day than Mrs Lawson expected. Her hair was not done as she usually does it and she was only just tidying

¹¹⁶ Henry Lawson, Letter to David Scott Mitchell, 11 February, 1902, *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890-1922*, 131-132.

up. The first thing that struck me was the thickness of her neck, and the wedge-shaped frontal part of her head. The forehead sloped back at the top and at the sides. The combination of [her] thick neck and narrowed top to the intellectual part of the head struck me as strange and gave me a sense of dismay. But she was cordial (Henry had just gone out) and in the excitement of meeting, the feeling passed. She made us a cup of tea and told us that she had been longing for a chance to get back to Australia and her mother and that when my letter reached them it had been decided at once that here was the chance. She also asked that we should not let Henry know she had told of her wish to go with us to Australia as he would mention it himself.¹¹⁷

Bertha gave Mary and her family the only bedroom in the tiny flat. Bugs fell from the ceiling at night onto the bed, and Mary jabbed them with her umbrella when they scattered at the first spark of light.

Drunken fights in the streets outside disturbed the nights. To eat, Mary described:

At tea time later on I sat on a box with my back against the sink, Lawson sat in a deck chair at the opposite end of the table, my husband next to him on the only strong four-legged chair. Lawson was still paying off the bills for the Asylums for the Insane where his wife had been for months and so was very poor.¹¹⁸

There was no bathroom, so they washed themselves in a tub in the communal laundry. She noticed that in other flats there were children who were locked up all day while their mothers went to work. Mary was clearly uncomfortable in the Dickensian surroundings that Henry, Bertha and their two children lived in. But she says she was more disturbed by Bertha's claims that Henry was abusing her; Bertha's confidences about her marital unhappiness began as soon as they arrived.

"Bertha said that nothing on earth would make her live with him again once she got away," the Dame recalls:¹¹⁹

She continued to talk of her relief at our coming and the release of getting 'home' to her mother. Her use of the word 'home' confusing me, I said once, what place did she really mean by "home". She said, 'where my mother is. When I get back to her I shall never leave her again'.

Again and again she told me that she 'hated' Henry and that once she got away she would never return to him. 'He thinks I will come back and I do not say anything, but he is mistaken,' she said. I never met anyone express hatred so vindictively as she did.

The next day the two men went out after breakfast and did London parks. Mrs Lawson still told of her miseries with Henry. But I had begun to doubt her and said that Henry seemed fond of her and the children and that nothing unkind showed in his manner. 'That is his cunning' she said. 'That is all put on!'

I'm thinking that in the person of Will Gilmore, Bertha had competition in expressing hatred so vindictively. Mary's husband, the adventurer and farmer she had met at the New Australia settlement in Paraguay, intensely disliked "Mrs Lawson" first of all for openly telling them about her marriage, and then more so after hearing what Henry confided in him man-to-man as they walked around London. Reading Mary's memoir soon after White Ribbon Day, the international day for prevention of domestic violence, I feel like placing a ribbon in the microfilm carton that holds his words:

That night, Will told me Henry had told him the story of the Asylum, Mrs. Lawson's false charges against him, in regard to the servant etc. and all the trouble he had

¹¹⁷ Gilmore, 'Personal History: Henry Lawson and I', 12.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, 13.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

had. And my husband said he did not believe a word Mrs Lawson said, that he was sure she cared nothing for Henry, only for what she could get out of him; that in his opinion she had only married him for his name and position, and that having no position in London, she wanted to get back to Australia where she could be somebody as Mrs Lawson. He said he pitied Henry and would take his least word where he would not take Mrs Lawson's oath... I could feel my husband's antipathy had increased as a result of the morning talk with Henry. Also he did not like her loud and vulgar manner when in the theatre. That night he said, 'If that woman were my wife I would wring her neck! She isn't fit to be any man's wife'.¹²⁰

Mary recounts Will's view was confirmed when they met Nelson Illingworth's father in London, whom the Lawsons initially stayed with when they came to the city and who told them Bertha was only suited to a man who would stand no nonsense and, "who would knock her down when she tried on her games".¹²¹

But Will wasn't finished. He was furious when he heard Bertha whispering to Jim about Henry "He's a bad man", just quietly enough so that Henry, half-deaf, couldn't hear:

It was this kind of thing that used to make my husband say if she were his wife she would wring her neck. And once, (for he is not that kind of man) 'There is only one kind of thing that sort of woman understands and that is the fist'.¹²²

I put the microfilm back in its Pandora's box, too unsettled to read any more.

* * *

I return to the library the following day and begin reading again. She claimed that Bertha confided to her that she sometimes threatened to throw the children out the window if Henry did not do what she wanted. She says Henry was so anxious about the children's welfare that he did not want Bertha and the children to travel alone to Australia, so he was very thankful that Mary and Will were accompanying them on the long voyage. Mary says that Henry, always the poet, told Bertha: "It is not mad you are, Bertha, but bad".¹²³

Or is this Mary exaggerating, to provide evidence for her portrait of Bertha as "not mad but bad" and so the principal cause of Henry's woes? Mary says she checked with Bertha's doctor in London prior to their voyage to Australia and he told her:

his sympathy was with her [Bertha], as any woman was to be pitied who had a husband who drinks but that as far as he could see it was a case of six of one and half a dozen of the other, and that the best thing that could happen would be for Mrs Lawson to go back to Australia at the very least for six months (Six or twelve months we had been told at first was the time of the intended separation...).¹²⁴

But Randolph Bedford, another Australian writer living in London, visited the Lawsons in their Paradise slum, and later writes it was Henry who wanted to return:

I went to see a friend – an Australian writer who has made a bigger stir in Australia, where his work is known and rewarded, than he ever will here. He lives beyond Islington, and curses England, crying to be delivered from the body of this death and

¹²⁰ *ibid*, 13-14.

¹²¹ *ibid*.

¹²² *ibid*, 16.

¹²³ *ibid*, 21.

¹²⁴ *ibid*, 17.

to be set down in an Australian sun again. If ever he says a good word of the country it will be from sheer perversity.¹²⁵

I pace between the truth and claims. I go back to Bertha's memoir, *My Henry Lawson*. It's spin for sure. But isn't everyone's? Bertha only writes that while Henry was being critically received in London:

His entry into the Bohemian life of London caused a backsliding into the arms of his old weakness. This was calamity...Matters went from bad to worse...We took an attic flat of two small rooms and a kitchenette and a bathroom in Paradise lane...Here I had Harry under my eye...we were desperately poor.¹²⁶

I return to a second read of Bertha's *Memories*, her initial memoir in the anthology by Henry's mates. This time I see that she mentions her illness but she does not disclose her swim in the Thames that Henry allegedly told Mary Gilmore about at the time. She writes instead:

I became very ill, suffering badly from insomnia which ended in a complete breakdown. For months I was in hospital, the home was broken up, and the babies were boarded with a Mrs. Brandt at Charlton, a little village near the Thames. Harry had been frantically distressed about my illness, and now he worked manfully, keeping quite right and devoting himself to looking after me and helping to nurse me back to convalescence. As I grew stronger, we were very happy again. For, save in those dark moods for which he was not really responsible, Harry was a wonderful companion – sensitive, keenly appreciative, and very kindly. I know how grateful he always was, how firmly determined never to fail me again, and how hard he battled through all the years against almost insurmountable difficulties of deafness, nervousness, poverty, discouragement and ever-present temptation. That highly nervous temperament of his which caused his moods had also endowed him with a great vitality and a power of feeling and understanding which carried him through the dark places of his life, leaving the bitterness behind.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Randolph Bedford, 'Letters from Exile,' in *The Critic*, 10 October, 1903, 13. See also Lucy Sussex, 'A Gum-Tree Exile: Randolph Bedford in England and Italy,' *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 10, no.1 (2013). <https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/article/view/2379>.

¹²⁶ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 74-79.

¹²⁷ Lawson, *Memories*, 114.

11.

Before I left for London, I saw a lady admiring a collection of Swarovski jewellery on display in a vintage accessory shop I often browsed in.

“I have a lot of it,” the shop owner told the customer. “People see it and say I have something, and bring it in”. It was a tiny shop; an open conversation.

“I have a Swarovski tennis bracelet,” I agreed. “It was a gift present my ex gave me”.

“I’ll sell it for you,” she offered. “You don’t need to hold onto his guilt”.

In London, returning on the bus from the War Museum to the city centre, surrounded by landmarks, I have another flashback. I realise that it had been here in London where Dan had given me the bracelet.

We’d first met up at his father’s home, not far from Bertha and Henry’s last London address. I remember him giving me the narrow blue box, embossed with the Swarovski name and containing the bracelet, a glittering apology for what I yet didn’t know. He pressed it into my hand and seemed awkward.

It is a forgotten memory of reunion, and disunion. You imagine reunions will be a surge of heart, a restorative hug – affirmation that being together again reveals how much you missed each other. But reunions aren’t always as they are imagined. They often mark the end rather than another beginning, and details blur in the tears of the time.

That night we had quiet sex in a hotel room and I fell asleep, exhausted from the flight; then the next day we went to Paris. It was meant to be a reunion after yet another three-month absence, when he’d been contracted to work as a musician on board ships.

This pattern had begun a year earlier, upending our previous arrangement from the time Ruby was nine months old; now I was working full-time as a news editor, and he was freelancing with gigs and looked after Ruby. Ruby crawled around his piano, played in the gym childcare while he worked out, and went to the beach with him and the local nannies, who fed Ruby their snacks when he forgot.

If I missed Ruby during the day, I tried not to show it. At night he dropped Ruby off at the office on his way to a gig. She would sit playing with the red shoes of the foreign editor, who’d be negotiating on the phone, or she’d toddle into my editor’s office and point at the TV.

My editor at the time congratulated me on our arrangement when it began. For two years it had seemed ideal.

Or not.

“I have another cruise,” he said, as we looked down at the Seine.

“How long?” I asked.

“Six months”.

My sense of solitude over the last year had been emotional as much as physical; but loneliness had been a simply precursor to this moment. On that bridge, a horrible feeling of deadness washed over me – what psychologists call an internal shift.

I didn’t cry. Maybe it was because the end had been such a long time coming, or because I had for too long now been sleeping alone and caring for our child by myself. Or, I had already cried too many times before

this day in Paris.

“I want a divorce,” I said.

“You don’t mean that”.

We left the city of love, unofficially adding to the French divorce rate. Do only Parisians divorce in Paris? He remained in London while I returned to Australia and our daughter, who’d been staying with my mother at her home up north.

“Oh love,” my mother said, reliving her own divorce. “Do you think he’ll come back?” She had had a picture of us in a frame on her dresser, taken soon after we met, our arms wrapped around each other in black t-shirts. Now she moved a book in front of Dan’s face.

A few days later, he followed me home to Sydney. Ruby flung herself at him as he came in, and clung to him. He produced a myriad of presents bought in ports all over the world, including a Russian doll with wolf hair and an exotic Barbie in a sari, and Ruby placed them beside her pictures of him – one of him playing the piano and one of him with her as a baby. It was a little shrine to him, the life she remembered – the life she wanted back.

While Ruby slept, he said: “I’m going to do this cruise. I think we should have a break. I don’t want to be a sad old fuck in a shop. I want to have my career and I can’t have it here. I’m going to miss seeing her grow up...this is the hardest thing I’ve had to do”.

He’d made his choice. I’d heard him say he knew what he was giving up, and I’d seen him later that week say goodbye at her classroom and walk away crying; but he still walked away. So I knew then, as I know now, that there was no use in thinking there was a different ending.

Dan and I cried together on the old brown couch we’d meant to replace, feeling the end as much as we’d felt the beginning.

* * *

Before I left this last London trip, I have lunch with my former assistant editor, Tracy, whom I worked with in the lead up to, and through, my divorce. In Sydney, she used to seek the sunshine during lunch hours; but in London, she was wrapped in a thick parka and was now a mother of two. We swap stories about colleagues scattered between the UK and Australia. Some, like Tracy, have become mothers too and are seeking the elusive work/life balance that is always talked about it, but in reality rarely happens.

“What do you remember of that time when I split up with Dan?” I ask her. I’m always seeking other perspectives. “I don’t know how I did it”.

“I must say I don’t know how you did it either,” she replies. “You did seem a bit of a shambles back then... you seemed very vulnerable and overwhelmed. You just sort of got on with things, but you did look pretty stressed and unhappy. I remember passing you one day on the bus on the way to work – it was pouring with rain and you didn’t have an umbrella. You were soaked to the skin and I remember thinking that you were probably so preoccupied with getting Ruby out the door that it didn’t even occur to you to keep yourself dry”.

“That happened the other day, I was caught in a sudden thunderstorm without an umbrella. So I think

that's me..."

"I remember you telling me how stressful it was getting her to school and then to work on time," Tracy continues. "Ruby would refuse to put her shoes on and then you'd miss the bus. I felt some people at work weren't very sympathetic to what you were going through – I think because you didn't make a fuss or cause a drama. Now that I'm a mother, I marvel all the more at how you not only managed to get through that, but you were writing a book in the middle of it all. I remember at the time that I – and many of your friends – felt you were letting Dan off quite lightly and we felt that when you left him it was long overdue".

* * *

The liner, *Karlsruhe*, had two masts, was constructed of steel and steamed at 13 knots. There were 44 first class cabins, 36 second class and 1,955 third class, or steerage, passengers. In April 1902, William and Mary Gilmore, and their son Billy, and Bertha and her two children, Jim and Barta, were among the throng below deck. During its 35-day trip to Australia, the ship was on an accidental world tour, carving a route via Genoa, Cairo, the Suez Canal, Aden, Bombay to Colombo, and then across the Indian Ocean to Fremantle, around the Bight to Adelaide, Melbourne and finally Sydney.

On the day of departure, Henry had intended to accompany the little party on the train to Southampton. But tension between Henry and Bertha soured the farewell, Mary says. A fight between them had begun the day before, when Henry was supposed to pick up the money for the tickets from his agent, Pinker; they had argued about whether he should go alone.¹²⁸

...She told him she had always hated him, that she hoped she would never see him again once she got away and that not even if she was dying would she come to him again. Part she told me; part Henry told Will. She told me then, and again after we were at sea, that she hoped she had seen the last of him forever. Henry was sad for the trouble, sad for the parting, anxious beyond belief for the children, and half afraid that he was putting too much risk on us in putting her in our charge. His wife showed neither grief nor anxiety. Her one idea was to get away...

We left for the docks the next morning at nine o'clock by train from Liverpool St station. She would not have Henry come to the ship, so they parted at the train. She neither shook hands with him nor kissed him. She crossed to the side of the carriage farthest from him, turned her back on him and drew the children's attention from their father to the scenery. He stood sad and humiliated at the other window.

'Aren't you going to say goodbye, Bertha? You are going to the other side of the world and we may never see each other again,' he said. She merely flung the word at him over her shoulder and deliberately kept the children's attention so that they would not turn to their father.

My husband said to me, 'did you ever see anything so callous in all your life? She even prevented Jim from saying goodbye to his father'. And so we set out on our journey.

* * *

¹²⁸ Gilmore, 'Personal History, Henry Lawson and I,' 117.

Whoever was spinning, the truth of it is that Mary, at Henry's request, was reluctantly escorting his wife home, believing the only cause of Bertha's breakdown had been Bertha herself.

Her opinion of Bertha worsened on the ship. She shocked other passengers by asking for an eye-glass when in Egypt a nude local rushed along the bank beside the ship. She flirted with staff. Sightseeing in Genoa, Mary writes that Bertha, in a temper, shocked Italians at the Campo Santo fountain by hitting Jim with his own fist, blacking his eye.

I remember what Bertha's daughter writes about her mother's volatility and swift temper. Was it Mary's job then to watch out for danger signals, as Barta said she did as she grew up?

Reading Mary's memoir, the growing dislike between the two women builds like a rogue wave that one afternoon crashes onto the ship's deck. Mary recounts that after seeing Bertha in the "black rage" whilst in port at Genoa, she writes a letter to Henry as promised about Bertha and the children:

...Henry, fearful for the children's mental inheritance, lest it should be unstable, had asked me to write a full account of them and my opinion of them after I should be at sea, and when I should know more of them than in the few days in London. At Aden I did this, saying exactly what I thought of them as to appearance, capacity, and futures. Jim, I said, was like Henry, and from his highly strung sensitive temperament I expected him to be a writer or an artist. Bertha [Barta] I regarded as more like her mother, and that she might possibly make a successful and cheap and popular novel writer.

I wrote the letter while Mrs. Lawson sat at the opposite side of the table.

'I am writing to Henry,' I said. 'Have you any message? Shall I tell him you are all well?'

...The letter I last mentioned I took along and posted. About an hour later I went up on deck. I noticed a crowd of people and Mrs Lawson amongst them. As soon as she saw me she rushed at me and struck me shrieking, 'I'll teach you to write to my husband behind my back!' and indulged in a series of accusations and charges in the most vulgar and violent language. Immediately I thought two things – one the doctor's instructions [to tell the Captain], the other that she was a woman alone in our charge. My husband stepped forward to silence her. I stopped him. 'Say nothing. Remember what the doctor said...' I spoke low so no one would hear as I did not want it to go from me that she had been in an asylum, as the passengers (we were steerage) were mostly a low class of immigrants – one or two so immoral they had to be put off the boat – with a few decent but extremely narrow minded women and a few decent men.¹³⁰

Mary recounts that she insisted Bertha read her letter aloud in front of the fascinated passengers, but Bertha refused until Mary threatened to give it to another passenger to read instead. The letter, Mary says, had nothing scandalous and "All the fight went out of her after that".¹³¹ Mary says she threw the letter into the sea.

* * *

By June 1902, the *Karlsruhe* was moored in the spiced heat of Colombo harbour. As all great rivals eventually do, that month Bertha and Mary reluctantly came together as they stood on the deck on the lookout for Henry, who was due to join them any day now. He'd sent them a telegraph to let them know that he'd left

¹³⁰ Gilmore, 'Personal History: Henry Lawson and I,' 19.

¹³¹ *ibid*, 21.

London on the next ship bound for Australia, after he'd completed the proofs of his book, *Children of the Bush*, and finalised the practicalities of their London life.

Mary maintains that she stopped writing to him after the letter fight on the deck; but he feared for the children and gave up his London career to be with them. Henry always said he delayed his passage because of the *Children of the Bush's* final edit. The women's relationship over Henry remained tense. A toxic triangle of love, loss and loyalty.

Reflecting on the "long established rumour" that Mary Gilmore and Henry had an affair, which Bertha suspected when she confronted Mary over the letter, Ruth Park later writes:

my personal opinion is that the 'love affair' was one of Henry's little brags with which he successfully wounded his estranged wife. The tale possibly wounded Mary Gilmore also. But the truth will probably never emerge from the shadows of the long gone past.¹³²

In Colombo a catamaran neared the *Karlsruhe*. As it drew closer, Bertha saw a figure:

white clad from hat to shoes, while the crew salaamed to him as if he were a prince. Piled on the outrigger were heaps of oranges, guavas, durians and other kinds of fruit, all belonging to Harry, it proved. For needless to say, the tall, gaunt figure in white was he – but it was a Harry who had celebrated well.¹³³

I imagine Mary Gilmore smiling and Bertha's mouth becoming set as he boarded with his booty. Bertha recalls that her husband was contrite, but "I still felt hurt and could not forgive him".¹³⁴

They sailed for Sydney, and separation.

¹³² Park, *Fishing in the Styx*, 195.

¹³³ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 79.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

12.

To Hannah:¹³⁵

Spirit Girl to whom t'was given
To revisit scenes of pain,
From the hell I thought was Heaven
You have lifted me again,

Through the world that I inherit
Where I loved her ere she died,
I am walking with the spirit
Of a dead girl by my side.

Through my old possessions only
For a very little while,
And they say I am lonely,
And they pity, but I smile:
For the brighter side has won me
By the calmness that it brings,
And the peace that is upon me
Does not come of earthly things.

Spirit girl, the good is in me
But the flesh you know is weak
And with no pure soul to win me
I might miss the path I seek;
Lead me by the love you bore me
When you trod the earth with me,
Till the light is clear before me
And my spirit too is free.

* * *

On board the *Karlsruhe*, Henry's mood withered like the fruit he carried aboard after his flamboyant entrance at Colombo. He says as soon as he changed ships, the voyage home went from heaven to hell. But Mary says they were thankful that Henry had arrived to take charge of his wife, whom Mary had decided was still certifiable.

I imagine the oceanic arguments between Henry and Bertha, their tempers pitching like the sea they sailed across, until Henry jumped ship in Adelaide in July 1902, leaving Bertha and the children alone on board once again. I imagine her weary, angry eyes as she held the hands of her children, who waved to their departing daddy.

I reach back into my own memories. I remember that feeling. Dan's hug and kiss for Ruby on the stairs by the frangipani tree that shaded the apartment windows as the taxi waited on the street. The resigned but sad look as we said goodbye for yet another three-month separation. Our daughter's head in between us. Her hand in mine as the taxi sped away to the airport, away from us.

Bertha has a version of Henry's flight and Mary Gilmore has her story, derived partly from her

¹³⁵ Lawson, 'To Hannah.'

memory of events and partly from Henry's confidences. It's as though the two women are whispering in each of my ears.

I read Bertha's story in her memoir first. She blames her outrage over Henry's fruit- and alcohol-laden arrival onto the ship in Colombo Harbour for making the voyage tense. She writes:

Harry left the ship in Adelaide and travelled by train to Melbourne, in order to interview my brother and arrange reconciliation between us. Eventually this was done there, in Williamstown... Harry and I had 24 hours together in Melbourne. Then he set off again by rail to prepare a home for us in Sydney...¹³⁶

But Mary Gilmore insists Henry stayed on the ship until Melbourne where, with a love letter in his pocket, he rushed to meet the bohemian girl who had moved to Melbourne while he'd been in London. Mary calls the girl "Ruth" but she was in fact Hannah:

Here also he had gone out hoping to see 'Ruth'. He came back broken-hearted. Ruth was dead. She had left him a little message of love – her unforgettable love and understanding. I think Ruth must have been a second Mrs. Byers only young, and fresh with the sweetness of youth. Lawson had told me all about Ruth. Once she said to him, 'I would like to have a child to you Harry...I would like to be the mother of your child. How wonderful he would be'.

When he went ashore at Port Melbourne he told me, 'If I can only find Ruth and lay my head in her lap I will be cured of all my trouble'. He had told Will about Ruth, too. Sometimes I think Ruth must have died in actual childbirth, but I do not know. I was so sorry for Henry that I could have told him to lay his head in my lap; only that when you are married to someone else you do not do these things. I kissed him on the forehead.¹³⁷

The last time Henry had been in Melbourne was two years earlier, when he had sat for his portrait in Longstaff's studio, alight with expectation for success in London. Trams still roll past that studio building today, crammed with commuters with iPhones instead of letters in their pockets.

In a letter to George Robertson, Mary writes:

As long as I live I shall never forget that little bit of soiled and crumpled paper, which had never left that man's pocket – the breast pocket – and which held a hope that kept him able to endure. I have heard many men's stories, many stories of men and women, but none so tragic as this; and this one I saw, for he showed me the slip with a face alight as he left the ship at Williamstown, and he came back to me with the light quenched and his life in ashes.¹³⁸

* * *

Little is known of what happened to Hannah, beyond brisk medical details and what Henry confided to Mary Gilmore on that day on the ship.

She had been living in Melbourne and working for her parents at their music store. But on June 1, 1902 she was taken to hospital where, according to her death certificate, she died two days later at 2.30am, aged 25, from as Colin Roderick primly explains in a 1968 article about her, "inflammation of certain internal

¹³⁶ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 79–80.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ Quoted in Colin Roderick, 'Henry Lawson and Hannah Thornburn,' *Meanjin Quarterly*, 27, no.1 (1968), 87.

organs".¹³⁹ He means those scary women's bits he couldn't bear to utter: the uterus, the fallopian tubes, and the cervix.

I'm inflamed by his primness. But Roderick's research into Henry's bohemian mystery girl discovered more about her death than what is known about her life. His 1968 article continues:

She declared herself to be a 'domestic' and that to be four months pregnant...She had been troubled for a fortnight before and had seemingly been in a serious plight for a week. As the weekend wore on she grew weaker, her temperature rose, her pulse fell and death supervened at half-past two o'clock on the Sunday morning.¹⁴⁰

In his Lawson biography, published in 1991, Roderick is still prim, but braver in discussing the finer details. He adds Hannah was:

Four months pregnant and about a fortnight earlier had been taken ill on a railway station. She said three or four days while at stool, something had come away. Four days before admittance she'd lost a clot of blood and began douching herself...within 24 hours of admittance her temperature soared and a curette became mandatory. The size of the foul placenta loss that this yielded indicated Hannah had left it too late to effect a recovery from the septic condition of her reproductive organs.¹⁴¹

Now it makes sense. The official cause of death, Endometritis,¹⁴² could be the official reason for a very unofficial botched attempted abortion.

Mary Gilmore is in my ear again. I imagine her consoling Henry on the ship in Melbourne when he returned after his attempt to see Hannah. His "life in ashes" as Mary dramatically writes. Ashes to ashes; dust to dust...the funeral rite would have been intoned over Hannah's casket as it was lowered into a YMCA shared grave in a Melbourne cemetery, six weeks before Henry arrived in July 1902.

* * *

Why do we reunite when we know it is ending? When it is overdue? Bertha and Henry reunited in Sydney towards the end of 1902. Perhaps for the sake of the children. Perhaps because a separation was so daunting, so overwhelming, that it is easier to try again with promises whispered in bed.

I don't know if Bertha ever knew that Henry had been trying to leave the marriage as well as the ship in Melbourne, or perhaps she knew that a certain bohemian girl was gone for good.
A life in ashes.

¹³⁹ Roderick, 'Henry Lawson and Hannah Thornburn,' 79.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *ibid.*

13.

Letter from Henry Lawson to actor and theatre entrepreneur, Bland Holt, dated August 12, 1902, from “Marlow”, Whistler Street, Manly:¹⁴³

Dear Bland,
Many thanks. I have been very ill or I should have called. Went into a private hospital for a spell, where there were six (6) pretty nurses and I the only good-looking patient. Was getting very contented when Mrs. Lawson called and fetched me home. If I don't get to town on Wednesday I will call next week early and tell you all about it. Many compliments to Mrs. Holt and your cheerful self. Mrs. Lawson sends kind regards. She is blossoming into an authoress.
Yours Truly,
Henry Lawson

* * *

I keep stumbling over people. Back in Sydney, I glance at a plaque in the footpath marking the former home of “feminist Rose Scott”. I remember Bertha writes about her as a friend, whom she was first introduced to when she and Henry would visit. It's now a motel-style retirement village with anonymous and identical security doors on cement balconies.

Walking along Darlinghurst Road, the bronze tiles are engraved with names and quotes. Down the block backpackers tread dirt into a plaque identifying Mary Gilmore's former home, “number 99”.

In July 1902, far from the streets of Darlinghurst, Henry heard the clattering of train wheels over tracks as he travelled ahead from Melbourne to Sydney. I imagine his head against the train window as it railed north, past rain and dust. Upon arrival, he promised *The Bulletin* editor, Archibald, to take rest at a convalescence hospital.¹⁴⁴

Bertha seems tired but resigned in her letter to him at the hospital, written after she arrived in Sydney Harbour with the children. I calculate she is only 25, dealing with two small children – Jim was four, and Bertha, two – mounting bills and an alcoholic husband with frustratingly great promise, if only he'd pick up a pen more often than a beer. “Your name is now before the public,” she urges. “Get ahead with your novel. Be like Kipling”.¹⁴⁵

After Henry returns from his “rest” hospital, they live in small cottages – “Beauchamp Terrace”, “Marlow” and “Ladywood”, a few streets back from the harbour and the beach at Manly. But as summer came, stress spirals again. This time they can't blame the lack of sunshine, because it is glaring through the windows. I hear the shouts drifting on the sea breeze as the children sleep in their rooms. Then they have no beds to sleep on, because the furniture is seized in lieu of rent. I see Bertha hunched over with worry, as she was in the cottage in England. Henry misreads her anxiety as being “insane”. She is only insanely worried.

¹⁴³ Henry Lawson, Letter to Bland Holt, 1902, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890-1922*, ed. Roderick, 133.

¹⁴⁴ *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890-1922*, 132.

¹⁴⁵ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, c. 1902, in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895, 1950, MS6026, Box XX1A, Lawson Material, State Library Victoria.

In a barely decipherable letter undated, but thought to be written around this time – in October 1902 – with a 4H pencil in a newspaper office, Henry sent a rushed letter to his friend, Bland Holt:

I have to see Dr. Bennet tonight about getting my wife into an asylum. Trouble is, I want to borrow 1 pound 1 shilling. She wants to come home with me, but it is impossible. She is now at her mother's at Castlereagh St, next to the fire station (the house near McNamara's). Her mother is also insane. I want to get her away from there. Ring up Dr. Bennet in College St. and he will tell you the truth. I will have 50 pounds on 1st. She is the mother of my children and therefore – [unsigned]¹⁴⁶

The letter abruptly stops. It's a scrawl for help. He blames her mental state. She blames poverty and alcohol. We always blame each other. I wonder if she's sick of marriage stress, and has gone home to mother.

I remember what Bertha writes upon their return to Sydney.

We will be happy yet.

* * *

Bertha's letters were written with a confused heart. Yet some letters, equally personal in nature, are flat and fearsome. Earlier in December, the Water Police District of New South Wales writes such a letter, just to Henry. It was an emotionless and factual summons requiring him to attend the Water Police Court, now the Justice & Police Museum at Circular Quay, to answer Bertha's first legal charge – deserting her and his children. The summons is written with strikethroughs. I think the author of the document was in a hurry.¹⁴⁷

Whereas ~~information~~ complaint on oath hath this day been made before the undersigned, one of his Majesty's Justices of the Peace and for the said state of New South Wales for that ~~you did~~ on the fourth day of December at Manly in the said district Bertha Marie Louise Lawson was compelled under reasonable apprehension of danger to her person, leave the residence of you, her husband, and she therefor [sic] prays that she may be deemed to have been deserted by you without reasonable cause. That she is now at Manly aforesaid without means of support. That you are well able to support her but neglect to do.

These are therefore to command you, in His Majesty's name, to be and appear, on Wednesday the TENTH day of December 1902 at Ten O'clock in the forenoon at the Water Police Office, Sydney, in the said state, before such stipendiary Magistrate or stipendiary Magistrates for the Metropolitan Police District in the said State as may then be there, to answer to the complain and to be further dealt with according to law. GIVEN under my HAND AND SEAL, this sixth day of December in the year of our Lord, one thousand, nine hundred and two at Sydney in the said state.

Henry is on the record now. He's on notice. Friends of the unhappy couple gather in corners. The end is coming.

But on that day, on December 6, Henry is found at the bottom of a cliff.

¹⁴⁶ Henry Lawson, Letter to Bland Holt, 1902, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890-1922*, ed. Roderick, 137.

¹⁴⁷ Summons to Henry Lawson, 1902, in Lothian Publishing Company Records, 1895-1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A, Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

14.

Excerpts from *Lawson's Fall*, an unpublished, handwritten poem by Henry Lawson discovered after his death among his papers and probably composed in December 1902:¹⁴⁸

T'was the white clouds flying over or
the crawling sea below -
On the torture of the present or the dreams
of long ago

Or the horror of the future born of black days
fate or all
Never mind! The Gods who saw it know the
cause of Lawson's fall.

They will place a seat and signpost on the highest point of all,
With a guardrail on the cliff edge and
they'll call it "Lawson's fall".

* * *

In Manly my friend Anna and I head for the isthmus that leads to North Head; one side of it faces the harbour and the other faces the ocean.

At the ocean beach, Anna and I follow the curve of the boardwalk towards North Head, stopping for a swim in the clear sea. Tomorrow there will be a shark alarm, but today it is tranquil. We continue walking along the scrub- and rock-lined boardwalk that warms our feet to Shelly Beach, which faces the cove at the beginning of the isthmus. Tents and towels are strewn across the sand.

At the back of the beach, we climb a track that leads up to the headland car park. The ocean spans to the horizon. Two wet-suited fishermen have climbed up some cliff steps. One of them is carrying a half-beheaded fish gutted through with a spear.

"It's near here somewhere," I say.

A council worker slows in his car. He leans forward in his high-vis jacket.

"We're looking for Blue Fish Point," I tell him.

"Dangerous down there," he warns.

"More the cliff top," I reassure him. I didn't want to die researching a hundred-year-old poet's plunge. He points us to another track at the end of the car park. Trees tangle into scrub. We walk up rough rock steps covered in sandy dirt into the bush.

"How dense would it have been when Henry walked – stumbled? – up here?" I think aloud. "If there was this rocky track at all".

A large white-and-red sign, graffitied with love initials, declares: "DANGER warning! Achtung! Attenzione! Please be careful. Unfenced cliff and rocks. Ledges. Unstable surfaces". Just in case you still didn't

¹⁴⁸ Henry Lawson, 'Lawson's Fall,' *La Trobe Journal*, 70 (2002), 52.

understand, a stick figure stumbles over a cliff with tumbling rocks. Draw a moustache on, and it could be Henry. It's dangerous up here, as much as the rogue waves below.

We stay on the main path until it breaks out onto the lookout. Here it's securely fenced. We look over the drop to the fishermen below. The scrub falls away with the sheer cliff face.

Anna turns to a couple beside us. "Henry Lawson fell off this cliff," she declares.

"Here? And he survived?" They are incredulous.

"It can't be here," I say, perplexed. "He would have died".

"Did he fall? Or jump? Or was he drunk?" the guy asks. He's intrigued too. I'm impressed he knows his poets.

"Probably all three," I say. I'm looking for other paths.

"Who found him?" Anna asks, awed by the drop.

"A fisherman".

According to a news article, the fisherman, Sly, was walking along the cliffs at 10am when he saw a figure at the bottom of the cliff. Using a path fishermen used to get down to the rocks, he found that the man was Henry Lawson. It's unclear how long Henry was lying there before he was found.

Another path spindles to the side. A large spider's web spans across the trees. Christmas beetles and baby spiders are caught in the web. I think that's how Henry felt.

We retreat from the spider. Back along the main path, there's a sidetrack with another danger sign. We clamber over the sandstone rocks, careful not to slip into the scrub.

This track opens to an unfenced cliff top, jutting over the same point. We sit, our feet dangling over the edge. It undulates and jags rather than a sheer drop like at the lookout.

"This is more likely," I venture. "You could survive this. Especially if you were drunk".

We silently contemplate a starry sunrise, a drunken poet, a cry in the dawn.

* * *

The following month Henry writes to *The Bulletin* about his fall from Manly:¹⁴⁹

Dear Bulletin,

Had a fall a week or two back – it wasn't the first. Some say eighty feet, some ninety and one man swore it was a hundred. I'll settle that with a tape-measure and the help of the man who picked me up – and another to hang on to my coat tail – when I get on my feet again. Fell sheer, as far as I remember, and the condition of my clothes bears this out – coat and waist-coat all right; pants torn a little at knee and foot of one leg, one boot 'bust'. Landed between jagged rocks and sand – or sand and rubble. Broke ankle and lost an eyebrow. (Pipe, tobacco and matches safe). Had whiskey on board...

...When I was leaving the Casualty Ward of Sydney Hospital – which chambers of Horrors I shall always remember kindly – I shook hands with a boy who'd had some toes cut off – a manly little fellow – and he said: 'Good-bye Mr. Lawson, better luck next time!' It sounded funny to me.

¹⁴⁹ Henry Lawson, Letter to *The Bulletin*, c. 1903, in *Henry Lawson: A Campfire Yarn*, ed. Cronin, 168.

When I first read his letter, I smiled, recognising Henry's opportunism in submitting this account for publication. Henry, like most writers, couldn't resist turning a survival into a story.

Mrs Byers, their former landlady in North Sydney, heard about Henry's accident from the papers. She bustled in to see him in the city. She confides there was a revolver:¹⁵⁰

The next time I saw him was after he went over the cliffs at Manly Beach. I saw him in the hospital and what a wreck he looked. He was thin as a skeleton but how pleased he was to see us. A niece of mine was with me and he held onto us as if he feared we would leave him too soon. We went to see him again, but he had gone out though was still on crutches. We called to see his mother in Phillip St. She spoke kindly of him but said that Harry should never have left her, and that his proper place was with her.

Mrs Byers says that a revolver was taken from Henry by the doctor, and then returned "with great reluctance" after he requested it. The doctor told Mrs Byers: "Seeing that this is Mr. Lawson's property, I have no right to it, but tell Mr. Lawson to be careful how he uses it". Mrs Byers records: "As soon as Lawson received it again he sold it".¹⁵¹

* * *

Letter from Bertha Lawson to Henry, residing in Sydney Hospital, dated December 14, 1902:¹⁵²

Dear Harry,

I'll come on Wednesday, with the children to see you. Any way eat all you can, and you will soon be well. I gave mother a shilling for stamps for you, and she said she'd take paper & etc. to you today.

I enclose a statement of accounts; so as you will see how I stand and how I spent the money. You see, I have to let the cottage or the rooms, and then I will also go out and work because the rent and the furniture amount to 17/6 a week before a scrap of food is bought. I have answered advertisements both for work and boarders, and apartments and haven't had a single reply. If all else should fail, I can still go out and work by the day. I answered an advertisement for an assistant in a draper shop, but they didn't want me. I've heard nothing from the Bulletin re my story, so they apparently wish to treat me with silent contempt. If all else should fail I'll ask Bland Holt to give me a chance on the stage. I'll not go on the street.

Love from the kiddies & your wife
Bertha

* * *

I can't believe Henry didn't break his neck, and it sounds like neither can his friends, but all Henry has broken is an ankle. He is laid up in Sydney Hospital in the city, a celebrity patient, before he's moved to another "rest hospital" as much for his depression and alcohol, it seems, as for his continued recovery from his injuries from the fall. Bertha hurries and flurries to his bedside. She writes in between visits. When he is released home, she

¹⁵⁰ 'Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers,' ed. Curtis

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*

¹⁵² Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, 14 December, 1902, in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895–1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

is by his side, watching if he should fall once more, and not just over a cliff.

A gossip item appeared in *The Critic* on February 28, 1903 about Lawson looking well and strong:

Henry Lawson has now quite recovered from the effects of his fall over the Manly cliffs, but is usually accompanied on his walks abroad by Mrs. Lawson – in case he should slip again, as it were. He is brighter and cheerier than he has been for years... he has a continual commission from English magazines, and some Australian papers. It is scarcely likely that the Lawsons will return to England. Henry would like to go, he can hear better amid the din of London than elsewhere, but Mrs. Lawson says that she would want 1000 pounds a week to live in Bourke (NSW) and would sooner live in Bourke than in London.¹⁵³

I wonder if Henry's fall delayed the separation once more. His near-death experience seems to have brought them together again for a few more months, and the desertion charge that Bertha lodged in Manly court in December seems if not forgotten, at least in abeyance. One last chance. *Dearie, let's forget the past.*

I remember a family trip to Whale Beach during a tense time in our marriage. It was the beach where Dan had once drawn "I love you" on my back soon after we'd met. On this trip, my niece and I went for a swim while Dan stayed on the beach with his father. The water was rough, and deceptively shallow. My niece swam into a swirling sand hole and struggled. I swam in after her.

"It's okay," I said as she panicked. "Hold on. Try to float".

I didn't want to let her go, in case she disappeared. We were so close to the shore, but the current was pulling us away. We trod water as the waves washed back and forth around us.

I saw Dan in the distance. He was looking at us.

"Dan!" I cried, swallowing water. I waved – not the calm signal for help you are supposed to do, but a drowning plea. He grabbed a boogie board and swam out. We clutched onto its foam as it rocked in the water with our weight.

"It's a rip," he said.

I nodded, afraid to talk again in case I swallowed more water. A surfer paddled over and, looking up, I saw a helicopter hovering above, supervising the rescue as the surfer and Dan helped us kick out of the rip to a sandbank. We hugged and kissed on the beach as my niece flopped on the sand, exhausted, with a towel around her shaking body.

"Thank you," I said, kissing him again.

Thinking back, the rescue probably gave our marriage another good six months.

¹⁵³ 'Personal Gossip,' in *The Critic*, 28 February, 1903, 6. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/212154580>. Also quoted in Tasker and Sussex, 'That Wild Run to London'.

15.

Letter written by Bertha Lawson from Ladywood, Whistler St, Manly, to Henry Lawson, undated but thought to be in February 1903:¹⁵⁴

My Dear Harry,

I am writing as promised. Why did you ask me to go to day. You can never know what an awful struggle I had with myself to come & see you. You know dear, if you would rather we were parted, I am willing.

And it would be best to part now, we have made the break, and you did not seem a bit pleased to see me. Would you rather we separated?

I must know this. I have suffered. God alone knows. You never understood me and never will. Now through your family, I have to fight for my reputation. I have scarcely a friend, even Dr Bennett turned from me, it is always the case. A man gets every one's sympathy. (I can live it all down) Dr Bennett need not have said what he did. Of course when you are drunk, you are not responsible for what you say. But your cursed relatives go and verify your drunken statements. If you wish us to come together again it is on the understanding not a relative of yours darkens our door. I will never speak to Peter or your Mother as long as I live. She can go where you can see her and shed her crocodile tears and make a blessed fuss, but she would not put her hand in her pocket and give your children a sixpence. I hate her. Now Harry I want to impress on your mind. I'll have no deceit. It must be all or nothing with me. I have forgiven you. And I never thought I could do it. You asked me to go to day (after all I had done). Never mind I'm glad you told me. It is better to say what we think. Still I feel now. When you care to see me you will send for me. Don't think I will come, if you do not wish to see me. Mind Harry, I am quite agreeable to the Separation. I came to you and you asked me to go. Now you must send for me. I felt it because I suffered so terribly, in forgiving.

Still that is all over. I have stopped all law proceedings and I hope you soon will be well and strong again. You have plenty of sympathisers, plenty who will shield you, behind the slanders of your wife. I think I have courage to live it all down. If I wanted to love another man, or go wrong, it was not for lack of opportunity. You know my ideas of life, and you also know you are the only man I ever cared for. It is cruel the report should be round I forced you into a marriage. Any way. My own heart & conscience is the only comfort I have.

Love from your children & your wife

Bertha

* * *

Louisa, Henry's mother, looms over the narrative. She is an unofficially separated woman herself after leaving her husband Peter, Henry's father, in the bush to move to Sydney in 1883. She is formidable. The severity of the 19th century photographs accentuates her strength. Henry called her "The Chieftainess".¹⁵⁵ She is such a memorable woman that she has transcended the status of Poet's Mother to being unforgettable in her own right.

I realise that Louisa was only 18 when she married Peter; the same age as Bertha when she met Henry. Author of *Louisa*, Brian Matthews, writes that Louisa at this age was "a magnificent looking young

¹⁵⁴ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, c.1903, Lothian Publishing Company records, 1895-1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A, Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

¹⁵⁵ Lawson, *Memories*, 90.

woman, volatile, passionate, even in a way, mysterious”.¹⁵⁶

Peter, 34, was a confirmed gold miner when he and Louisa married in similar haste to Henry and Bertha in 1866. Matthews observes: “To the day he died and despite the constant necessity to attend full time to other tasks, Peter continued to think about gold, theorise about it, and above all, seek it”.¹⁵⁷ I think of Henry’s relationship with alcohol as being the same. He thought about it; he wrote about it; and, above all, he sought it out.

The newlyweds moved to the Grenfell diggings, where Henry was famously born in a tent the following year. His younger sister, Gertrude, later writes what she’d been told of his dramatic birth: “Flood waters isolated the camp when Henry chose to enter the world and the nurse had to be carried over miles of yellow water”.¹⁵⁸ Colin Roderick, however, pours rain on this memory. He attests that Henry was born in a hut, not a tent, and there was no tempest, although I doubt Louisa, in the throes of 19th century childbirth, would have known or cared much about the weather.

His brother, Charles, followed Henry in 1869; then another brother, Peter; and finally the twins. But, while baby Gertrude survived, her sister Annette perished soon after birth.

The grieving mother feels her intellect perishing too. In 1883, Louisa left the drought-stricken farm and her absent husband on the goldfields, only taking with her to Sydney Gertrude, aged five years old, and their third youngest, Peter. I recognise it as one of those moments in which you know you are defining yourself.

Thinking of my daughter, I want to know how the 16-year-old Henry felt when he was left behind; with his father so often away, he’d been by his mother’s side, taking his father’s place on the farm. But this time Louisa left when Henry was away, helping his father, so he received the news that his mother had gone to Sydney while reading her letter jointly with his dad.

But family historian Olive Lawson argues that it was a mutual decision between Peter and Louisa. Peter had won a building contract at Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains, so Louisa moved with the younger children to nearby Sydney, and Henry and his brother Peter divided their time between working with their father in the Mountains and being with their mother in Sydney. Another story: biographer Heather Radi writes:

She [Louisa] kept up the story of being separated from her husband by misfortune but the marriage had ended...Peter sent money irregularly and Louisa considered legal action. Instead she took in sewing and boarders.¹⁵⁹

Mary Gilmore remembers that, soon after they met, Louisa sent Henry up to the Mountains to collect maintenance owed by his father that had abruptly stopped. Mary writes: “I recalled that Mrs Lawson was very bitter about it and threatened law action. Henry went on my advice and came back his father’s friend”.¹⁶⁰ Mary says that Henry had discovered his father had been ill and “for a week had lain in his hut with no

¹⁵⁶ Brian Matthews, *Louisa*. (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1987), 71.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*, 97

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*, 77.

¹⁵⁹ Heather Radi, ‘Louisa Lawson,’ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 10 (1986).

¹⁶⁰ Gilmore, ‘Personal History: Henry Lawson and I.’

food”.¹⁶¹

Matthews notes that, at the time Louisa left the family farm, younger brother Charlie had not been heard of for months. He’d disappeared after being flogged and mock-hung by his father. Many perennially absent parents double the discipline when they are at home, as if to double their presence. Brian Matthews writes of the day the boy left home:

The silent and dangerous diggings ring with Louisa’s strong voice calling Charlie, Charlie... But he is not at the bottom of an abandoned shaft; he is heading for Granville, two hundred miles away... For Charlie it is the beginning of nearly twenty years of wandering and petty crime.¹⁶²

Henry is not the only tragedy in the family. He is just the one everyone remembers.

* * *

Louisa was a spiritualist as well as a pragmatist; after she died, Henry recalls her holding a séance during his youth in his sketch, *Table Legs, Wooden Heads and a Woman’s Heart*. In Sydney, Louisa embraced the political spirit of the suffragettes. She launched Australia’s first women’s magazine, *The Dawn*, using women printers only and then challenged men-only-work unionisation when her printing was stopped because of her employment policy.

When Henry joined his mother permanently in Sydney, he contributed financially. He earned money painting trains, and then became inspired by faces in the street. Mother and son collaborated on his first book; they clashed over his romance with Bertha, and then clashed again when Louisa published an anthology of his work without permission while he and Bertha were living in New Zealand. She sounds both fascinating and frightening. The ultimate mother-in-law.

Although Louisa always focussed on her latest crusade rather than Henry and Bertha’s marriage, I’m thinking that blood was thicker than feminism when it unravelled. Louisa once wrote that wives’ hearts were tombs of their husbands’ faults, but I think that this mother’s heart was a tomb of her son’s faults.

Reading between the lines, dislike of Louisa radiates from the yellowed text in Bertha’s later memoir:

Harry’s sensitiveness and sympathy...in my opinion he inherited them from his father’s Norse blood...Harry’s father, Peter Lawson, was a gently, quiet soul, very much neglected by his wife and in turn neglecting her and the family, introspective perhaps, and sad, as Harry often was, just from contemplating suffering humanity... Louisa was a remarkable character, a very determined woman and she and her poet son could never see eye to eye... Harry’s mother lived with us for a time at Manly, when Jim was a small boy. Apart from that time, we rarely saw her during our life together except in times of sickness, when she sent for us.¹⁶³

She can “shed her crocodile tears,” writes Bertha, the drunkard’s wife. “I hate her”.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² Matthews, *Louisa*, 127.

¹⁶³ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 153-154.

¹⁶⁴ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, c. 1903, in Lothian Publishing Company Records, 1895-1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A, Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

But a quieter family voice comes down to us from Henry's younger sister, Gertrude, in her memories, also lodged at the Mitchell Library. The sheaves of paper from the family, from Mary, from Mrs Byers, all bristle with opinions about Henry and Bertha. Torn between loyalty to her brother and a woman's view of Bertha's situation, Gertrude weighs in: "The blame rested on Harry. His inebriation was a factor. Some of the responsibility lay with her highly-strung temperament. They were better off apart".¹⁶⁵

* * *

I think of the close relationship that has endured between my ex and my sister-in-law, Mariana, who was a second mother to Ruby during those years of isolation. Diana, the mother of Dan and Mariana, died before I met Dan, so I never had to negotiate a relationship with her, either during our marriage or after it ended.

Ruby was given Diana as her second name, as a tribute to the woman neither she nor I ever knew. Thinking about this, I once asked Mariana what her mother was like.

"You are like her," Mariana said. "Imagine you with conspiracy theories".

"Me?" I question, surprised. "Really? I thought she was an opera singer".

"She was, but she was a journalist and producer for the ABC," Mariana said. "She wrote novels. She was a Leo too. I think Dan married his mother".

Waiting for Dan at the airport on one of his infrequent visits home, Ruby hung over the rail in the arrivals hall while I hung back with Mariana and his older sister, who had accompanied us. We were like the three witches in *Macbeth*, conjuring up reasons to keep him in the country so he could spend more time with his daughter.

"A woman," his older sister decided. "Let's set him up with someone".

But that thought was lost when he appeared amongst the crowd. Families split and then entwine in different ways. I remain close friends with Mariana, his twin sister – sharing everything and rolling our eyes over a man who is her brother, her niece's father and my ex-husband.

"You know him," she told me recently. "You understand the person he is".

* * *

Undated handwritten letter in purple pencil from Henry to Bertha, Sunday, possibly in February 1903 while in hospital:¹⁶⁶

Dear Bertha

Was sorry I spoke harshly to you on Saturday, knowing the state of your nerves: but you knew the state of my health and should not have told me about that vile slander nor hinted that you believed it.

Will send money in a day or two.

Harry

¹⁶⁵ Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer*, 205.

¹⁶⁶ Henry Lawson, Letter to Bertha Lawson, n.d, in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895-1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A, Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

If you want me home send-write at once. Yes or No
Come to me on Monday (today).

* * *

On a damp winter's day I welcome the warmth of the State Library Victoria to comfort me from my emerging flu as much as from the cold rain outside. I've returned to Melbourne to read Bertha's original letters, contained in a plastic sleeve in an archival box at the library's reading room. I reach for the painkiller to stop the throbbing headache, wondering if 100-year-old letters are imprinted with germs.

By autumn, when the sea breezes had turned cool, tension tugged at the marriage again. I scrutinise the loops in her words. They curl with distress, with caring questions, despair, anxiety, then curt demands. She writes that in recognition of the cliff fall and Henry's recovery, she has "stopped all law proceedings" in the hope that Henry would be "well and strong again". She tells Henry, "My own heart and conscience is the only comfort I have".

Bertha's beyond the reason why. She's angry and hurt that his family and his friends are verifying his "drunken statements".

I can live it all down.

Henry is blunt in response to her long pleas. This time, there's no poetry or romantic letter. In the library, I unfold a decaying letter, lined with time. He has reached for the nearest pencil, a purple one, and scrawled the question: *Do you want me home, yes or no?*

* * *

Letter to Henry Lawson from Bertha Lawson, c. 1903.¹⁶⁷

"Ladywood",
Whistler St.
Manly.
Monday

Darling,

Just a line. Dr. Hall has just called in after you, he told me to tell you he'll be up to see you the first day he can get away. Harry, he is your truest and staunchest friend, don't let your delusions carry you away in this matter, believe me. I'm a woman and I know men, think of all he did for you. He has shielded you, all through Manly. He will take a great interest in you still. You be your true self to him. Tell him you never meant what you said when you were drunk – you know, you were so cruel to him that morning when he came to get you into Prince Alfred Hospital. Tell him also I'm not the black woman I'm painted. I would feel it if he believed me bad because he is one of the few men I have any respect for. I respect about five men in the world – and I hope they respect me. I love one – does he love me.

I will bring the children to see you on Wednesday. Dearie, I owe Dr. Hall my reason and my life. If it had not been for him, I should certainly have gone mad, and I'd

¹⁶⁷ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, c. March or April 1903, in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895–1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

have taken my own life to [sic]. So that is why I want you to be nice to him and to thank him for all he has done.

Why don't you write to me I'm so lonely. I get very miserable at times. Do you think of me. Ah dearie, do let us forget the past. And we'll try and make the future bright for each other, hurry up and get well. And we will commence a new life here by the sea. We won't have any relatives, and only those who have proved themselves friends.

Do you ever think of me I often do of you, and wonder if you are thinking of me – think and sum me all up from the first you have known of me. Now don't you think I've tried hard to forgive you, haven't I done all in my power. Harry, do you love me as much as I love you.

Love from your children and your lonely wife Bertha

Don't be influenced by anything your Mother or brother says.

* * *

They separate once more. Henry moves in with Mrs Byers back at the Coffee Palace in North Sydney. It was a large two-storey building that curved around a corner. I have imaginary tea once more with Mrs Byers, Henry's "little woman". She's sturdy and Scottish:

It made my heart ache to see him in such grief. He sat down with his arms on one of the tables and cried. My place was full, but I turned one of the pretty tearooms into a room. He was happy, and it made me happy too.¹⁶⁸

But Henry always wanted reconciliation, says Mrs Byers. This wasn't a mutual separation, which is the easiest rather than the roulette despair of what still can be. A clean split offers the relief of agreement. Irreconcilable differences.

Except Henry thought their differences were reconcilable. *Just another shot. Things will change. You'll see. C'mon. Let's try again. I love you.* Bertha seems to waver in March or April too. The reality of single parenting, the space in her bed and none in her life were, I knew, stark feelings.

There's a future still underlining Bertha's letters. She thinks there's a chance too. It's exhausting – all this hope for reconciliation and change, then once more realising that it is the same. I recognise how she feels.

Mrs Byers recalls:

Mr. Lawson often hoped and wished that the estrangement would be bridged...His hopes for this matter were very high...He was hoping that some place could be taken in the country where he would be able to settle down with Mrs. Lawson. He was very disappointed when the estrangement broke down.¹⁶⁹

* * *

Trying to find Mrs Byers' North Sydney lodgings and café, I walk to the former Coffee Palace site. It was demolished long ago. A modernist, fourteen-storey building spreads down the block instead. Looking at the new building, wondering about the history it replaced, I think the best marriages are like heritage buildings.

¹⁶⁸ Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers, ed. Curtis.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*

They can withstand stress and change. They weather regret, conflict and failings. They seem to overcome the restless search for the new. They are worn with time, yet restored because of the faith in their foundations.

I remember Bertha's lonely letter: "Harry, do you love me as much as I love you?"

Dearie, my heart is breaking.

* * *

My gypsy friend who lived on a yacht was all at sea after a sudden family breakup.

"I told the kids, 'Your father has abandoned ship'," she told me. "He's left me to deal with the boat and all this shit".

She was frazzled and her usual confidence was, like her husband, gone. "The boat's a tip and the kids won't help. They ask me for money and I tell them, 'I don't have it.' You know what? He can have the kids too and see how he likes it".

Then, six months after the split, she tells me she's sent the kids down south to live with their dad. The boat's being sold.

"I've got to get my career back," she tells me. "I've spent the last fifteen years working towards living on this boat. For what?" She's studying to be a captain and plans to work on other people's boats for a while. "Maybe I'll work on boats overseas. All I can think about is Thailand. I'm so tired after this shit".

"I had that feeling," I say. "I fantasised about falling asleep under a palm tree for a week".

She flails. "The kids say all I do is yell, and I tell them, 'Well, that's because you don't do anything I ask you to.' Anyway. The kids are better off with him. I'm too toxic right now".

"No you're not," I correct. "You've been a single parent and doing everything. It pulls you down sometimes".

Soon after our conversation, she posts a picture on Facebook of a forlorn cardboard man next to a sign that reads: "If you want to know who your true friends are, lose everything you own and see who is still standing by your side".

16.

Letter from Henry Lawson, Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney to George Robertson, dated April 26, 1903:¹⁷⁰

Dear R,
I am here remanded for medical treatment – drunk. She (Mrs. L) has taken out a legal separation, but will forgive me.
[H.L.]

* * *

Henry's publisher, George Robertson, remained a diplomat between Mr and Mrs Lawson. Bertram Stevens, the art critic, initially tried to help too. He recalls:

They asked me to fix up the matter privately, & agreed to the form I prepared. Lawson, however, came to me afterwards and wanted me to bluff his wife & prevent her from completing the separation. I advised Mrs. Lawson to go to a solicitor & apply for the judicial separation, which she did. It was clear to me at the time that Lawson was very fond of his wife and loath to lose her, yet it was impossible for them to be happy together.¹⁷¹

It is unlikely Bertha would have thanked her mother-in-law for anything, but she should have thanked Louisa for the support her magazine had given to those suffragettes who first lobbied for the deserted mothers left in the dust of the gold rush and then later for the wives deserted for drink. I wonder if Louisa's agitation for reform of the divorce laws in 1890 was influenced by her own experience as a gold digger's wife, although Peter promised financial support in Sydney. In May 1888, Louisa reflected in *The Dawn*:

Men legislate on divorce, on hours of labor [sic], on many another question intimately affecting women, but neither ask nor know the wishes of those whose lives and happiness are most concerned.¹⁷²

The pioneering women had worked with parliamentary reformer, Attorney General WC Windeyer, to obtain the *Divorce Amendment and Extension Act 1892* in the colony of NSW, mirroring a similar law enacted two years previously in Victoria. Supporting the 1890 Victorian divorce law in *The Dawn* with an editorial titled "The Divorce Extension Bill or The Drunkard's Wife," Louisa writes: "the fate of the Victorian divorce extension bill is a source of keen anxiety to many a miserable wife who has the misfortune to be linked for life to a drunkard".¹⁷³

It's ironic that Louisa fought for the right for women to divorce drunkard husbands, only to see the law applied to her son. Her article, written prior to Henry's marriage to Bertha, seems predictive of her future daughter-in-law's predicament:

¹⁷⁰ Henry Lawson, Letter to George Robertson, 26 April, 1903, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890-1922*, ed. Roderick, 140.

¹⁷¹ Stevens, *Henry Lawson*.

¹⁷² Louisa Lawson, 'About Ourselves', *The Dawn*, 1:1 (1888), in *The First Voice of Australian Feminism: Louisa Lawson's The Dawn, 1888 – 1895*, ed. Lawson, 23.

¹⁷³ Louisa Lawson, 'The Divorce Extension Bill or, The Drunkard's Wife,' *The Dawn*, 2:11 (1890), in *The First Voice of Australian Feminism: Louisa Lawson's The Dawn 1888 – 1895*, 52–54.

All the consolation the wife of such a ghoul could reasonably expect from the world is 'Why did you marry him?' About as reasonable a question as asking a condemned criminal awaiting his execution why he committed the act that brought him there. What availeth her to say, 'I was young, ignorant, inexperienced in the ways of the world, I believed and loved him, he vowed that I should not want; he loved me and would love me forever; all these promises he has broken. I have kept mine. He will not support me; he drinks and is cruel to me'. And the world's answer is 'As you have made your bed so you must lie on it'. A wife's heart must be the tomb of her husband's faults.¹⁷⁴

I hear Bertha say, *Henry, I kept my promise.*

* * *

The earliest divorce files are held at the State Records Authority of NSW, Kingswood. I catch a cab from Penrith station. We drive along roads lined with gum trees.

"What's out here?" the cabbie asks.

"State records," I reply. "Historical documents".

He's a chatty driver. "What are you researching?"

"Divorce," I answer. "I'm trying to find out about a divorce a century ago".

"Is it hard to get a divorce?" he asks.

"Then? Yes. It was really hard. I didn't realise you could even do it until I started researching this project".

"What about now?" he asks. "I mean, what do you have to do?" He's not happy, clearly.

I think back to my own divorce. We had a child, no assets. My lawyer had wanted me to state when and where her father could see her.

"When he is in the country will be great," I'd replied.

"Are you sure?" she'd asked. "Don't you want to specify when he can see your daughter?"

She was taken aback. She was used to formalising hand-over times, and who had the children on birthdays and Christmas. It was too loose, she argued.

"I can't pin him to dates and times," I explained. "I have no idea".

On the steps of the Family Court, after a hearing that only lasted a few minutes, she had said, "Easiest divorce I've ever done".

Yet I know of other divorces that drag on for years in a vicious wrangle for custody and assets. One man became so close to his lawyers that they came to his Christmas party.

"It depends," I tell the cab driver.

* * *

At State Records and Archives NSW, in a building hidden among half-cleared scrub, the divorce files are rolled

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*

in ribbon and labelled in calligraphy. There's a ceremonial respect here for the end of an undertaking that was supposed to last until death. I think of my own no-nonsense divorce certificate in plain black type, a reflection of how routine it is today to produce the piece of paper that will allow us to begin again.

The first divorce listed in the colony of NSW was in 1873, when Mary Kirkham Wilson dared to divorce her husband on one of the three grounds first allowed in the colony of NSW: desertion for more than three years. Conditional adultery and cruelty, also for three years and upwards, were the only other grounds available.

In 1873, Mary, who ran a drapery shop, was among the first in the NSW colony to take advantage of the new law at the Matrimonial Causes Jurisdiction convened within Sydney's Supreme Court of NSW. That so few people, and even fewer women, dared to divorce reveals the difficulty and distress of such a drastic action. There were not only the daunting legalities but the gossip stemming from the regular reports on who appeared in the Court.

I imagine Mary, walking nervously across the court foyer's black and white marble floor, and waiting under the dome ceiling soaring above her head. The air was musty from the Tank Stream running below, which caused perpetual seepage. The courthouse bulged with criminals, and now with divorcing husbands and wives. Next door, St James Church cast its disapproving eye "as Christian Witness to the City of Sydney".

I pore over handwriting in neat black ink on blue-lined paper. Mary alleged that her husband Robert and the "adulteress Isabella had boarded the *Arrivedera* to San Francisco". It was such a serious business, this first woman wanting a divorce, that the Divorce Court summoned the Master of the *Arrivedera* to confirm her story.¹⁷⁵

The court tried to summon Robert Wilson, aka Mr. Smith, back to Sydney from San Francisco. Unsurprisingly, he didn't respond and he was divorced in absentia. I tied up Mary's file with its elegant white ribbon, proud of her for what she did, and opened up the Lawson case, No. 4676.

* * *

Bertha's first claim for child support, in December 1902, resulted in an order that Henry pay her "two pounds 8". Desertion was an early version of child support and did not necessarily require judicial separation, which Bertha pursued in April 1903, or the full decree absolute divorce, which Mary Kirkham Wilson had accomplished. It seems quite amazing, when I think about it, that there was provision for deserted wives at all; but I'm being blinded by my assumption that, prior to the 1970s, little if any consideration was given to those who tried to forge lives apart.

However, I think this law only covered married mothers. Single mothers outside wedlock were seen as makers of their own folly. And until recently, or arguably still, unmarried single mothers were stigmatised by those two letters – "un" – attached to their status; they were subjected to unmarried mothers' homes, forced adoptions and unsupported poverty. Bertha told Henry that she had "to fight for her reputation"; but with the

¹⁷⁵ 'Law, Supreme Court,' in *Empire*, 23 October, 1874, 2.

ring on her hand – well, until she pawned it for money - she had a reputation to fight for.

But this was only 1903 and the acknowledgement of no fault was still over 70 years away. And, lest that fault be seen to be faulty, the 1899 Matrimonial Causes Act included that either the husband or the wife could petition the court to enforce a return to conjugal rights. By 1903, there was some progress: women as well as men were able to claim adultery without any extra clauses on the condition they prove they were domiciled in NSW. Previously, a woman had to additionally prove her “husband has been guilty of: incestuous adultery, or of bigamy with adultery or of rape or of sodomy or of bestiality with adultery, coupled with such cruelty as without adultery would have entitled her to a divorce...”¹⁷⁶

The 1899 act also allowed the husband or wife to dissolve the marriage if his wife had been imprisoned for not less than three years or attempted grievous bodily harm; there were grounds of desertion if, as a drunkard, or in the case of the wife, she’d “habitually neglected her domestic duties or rendered herself unfit to discharge them”.¹⁷⁷

The circumstances were extreme, as if the exhaustion of a marriage breakdown and rumours of real affairs weren’t enough. Without adultery, divorcing wives could claim desertion or drunkenness for three years and upwards, coupled with habitual desertion or cruelty; imprisonment for at least three years or frequent convictions in five years, recent attempted murder or intent to grievous bodily harm conviction; or that during one year she had been repeatedly assaulted and cruelly beaten by the petitioner. The conditions for the lesser judicial separation, as Bertha chose, were simpler: adultery or cruelty for two years and upwards, no incest required.

Hannah was a ghost now; if Bertha wanted to invoke the adultery clause, she could not subpoena a spirit to testify about the illicit relationship as the courts required. Anyway, there was the public humiliation in the papers to consider.

* * *

So, on that Friday, April 3, 1903 – on an Autumn day when the *Sydney Morning Herald* was reporting on an escaped tiger in Shellharbour, on unseasonal temperatures and Dame Nellie Melba’s visit to Sydney – Bertha wrote her affidavit about her celebrity poet husband that was duly lodged in the Divorce Court.

As well as alleging cruelty, Bertha invokes clause 16 (b): “That her husband has during three years and upwards been a habitual drunkard and either habitually left the petitioner without means of support or habitually been guilty of cruelty towards her”.¹⁷⁸

Guilty of cruelty. A habitual drunkard. Blacked my eye. Endangered me.

He has been cruel, she alleges. She repeats the allegation: *Henry has been cruel to me*.

I can hear the breathlessness in her voice, the rising stress, the anxiety to convince. And, and, and.

¹⁷⁶ No IX. An Act to Confer Jurisdiction on the Supreme Court in Divorce and Matrimonial Causes. 3 March 1873. <https://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/acts/1873-4a.pdf>

¹⁷⁷ NSW Legislation, Matrimonial Causes Act, 1899, No. 14. S.15 & S.16.

¹⁷⁸ NRS 13495, Divorce case papers #4676 Bertha Lawson, 1903, State Records and Archives NSW.

Then, then, then. Words start off as a soft, secure verbal embrace. But then, as love turns, words slap and spit.

The court records it all.

* * *

Poem by Henry Lawson, *The Separation*, published in 1906 in *When I Was King and Other Verses*:¹⁷⁹

We knew too little of the world,
And you and I were good—
'Twas paltry things that wrecked our lives
As well I knew they would.
The people said our love was dead,
But how were they to know?
Ah! had we loved each other less
We'd not have quarrelled so.

We knew too little of the world,
And you and I were kind,
We listened to what others said
And both of us were blind.
The people said 'twas selfishness,
But how were they to know?
Ah! had we both more selfish been
We'd not have parted so.

But still when all seems lost on earth
Then heaven sets a sign—
Kneel down beside your lonely bed,
And I will kneel by mine,
And let us pray for happy days –
Like those of long ago.
Ah! had we knelt together then
We'd not have parted so.

* * *

In the State Library Victoria, I unfurl scrolls of old poem proofs, ragged and marked like Henry. He mourns the separation and fears his children not knowing him in the drift of fatherhood after divorce.

We separate to protect ourselves. But the most telling of all detachments is how we depersonalise our previously intimate connections. One of my male friend refers to his ex as “the mother”. Or worse: “It’s the thing that gave birth to my child” a man spits at a BBQ when reading a phone text from his child’s mother.

Henry and Bertha depersonalise their relationship too. Love letters, poems and endearments made way for formal correspondence communicated via lawyers. “Darling” and “Girlie” became “Mrs. Lawson”.

I think about the flatlining that occurs at the end of a marriage. Mrs Byers saw it too:¹⁸⁰

Lawson often acted impulsively. One day he saw Mrs. Lawson with her child in North Sydney. He went up straight away and kissed the child, but took no notice of Mrs. Lawson. Naturally Mrs. Lawson was very indignant, and the same evening, called at

¹⁷⁹ Henry Lawson, 'The Separation,' in *When I Was King and Other Verses*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1905), 75-76.

¹⁸⁰ 'Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers,' ed. Curtis.

the house. Mrs. Lawson told me that if I did not keep Henry away from her, she would shoot him.

Until death do us part. Now that vow has taken on another meaning – until the death of the marriage. The irreconcilable differences read out in court are its eulogy.

Henry, you are dead to me.

* * *

Resting at the end of a lap swim, I watch two women holding on to the edge of the pool and kicking in tandem, their hair pushed under caps. They chat as they splash: “So I texted him. I was polite. I said, ‘It’s clear we have different interests. Let’s leave it before this goes on for too long.’ He texted back – get this! – ‘Yeah, I think so too. Your political tone annoyed me.’ My tone! My tone!” Their kicking stops and they stand up. “I wanted to text back. Then I thought – leave it”.

If only ending a marriage was that simple. A text. *Let’s leave it. Take care.* Instead, there are reams of formalities, even when you are amicable. Dan and I needed a Justice of the Peace to sign off a mutual consent form, then the court date to formally end it as we had a child. The alternative was to serve papers on the other partner, which seemed unnecessary and fractious.

But I did want a divorce. I wanted to know it was finished. So, during one of his brief visits home the year after we separated, I filled out my bit of the papers and took them to the beach house where he and Ruby were staying.

“We need to do this today,” I said to him, as he cut up his breakfast mango.

“Are you getting married again?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I want to know that it’s done. So we don’t have to think about it anymore. I’ve found a Justice of the Peace. It has to be signed off with a JP as a witness. Maybe they can do a divorce ceremony,” I suggest.

I wanted it to be dignified. Ruby was off playing with her cousins, oblivious to the piece of paper that signified the end of her parents’ marriage.

“I need to know it’s over,” I persisted.

“Okay,” he said, chopping. “If you want”.

He avoided me all day. He would be leaving soon, again. Who knew for how long? I didn’t know why it felt urgent, but I wanted it finished.

I crashed the night on the sofa, and early the next morning I swam in the ocean pool. As I stroked I suddenly felt a weight slip off one of my fingers. I duck-dived down to the sand, searching for a glint of gold. For the first time in my married life, my wedding ring had slipped off my finger.

In tears I kept looking. The water was still that day, so the sand was stable.

“Is this it?” a swimmer called, holding up the rose gold ring.

“Yes, thank you,” I said, and slipped it back onto my right hand, where it had lived since we separated. I jokingly called it my divorce finger. Today that was going to actually be true.

I hurried back to the house. "So we are doing this today," I said.

Dan was sleepy. "Yeah".

"Yeah," I said, determined. The loss of the ring seemed too significant to ignore.

All thoughts of dignified ceremonies having been put aside, I searched online for a local JP. The nearby chemist was one. Right.

Dan dressed and insisted on doing some piano practice first. Lunch first. Anything first.

"Dan. Please".

He looked upset. "I don't know why this is so important to you," he said. "Let's just wait until one of us needs to do it".

"It's our marriage," I replied. "And who knows when you'll be back in the country. What if you meet someone?"

We walk in silence to the chemist. At the rear counter, amongst prescriptions and hair products and barefoot children begging their parents for an ice cream, we ask for the chemist.

"How can I help you?" he says.

"We need you to witness our divorce papers," I say, as if I was asking for Nurofen. Perhaps I should have – a headache was coming on. "I tried to do something a little more formal, but there wasn't time..."

He looks between us. People queue behind us, interested.

We sign the papers. He signs too.

"Thanks mate," Dan says.

I take the papers, slip them back into the plastic sleeve and we walk out of the chemist, and our marriage.

* * *

Celebrating a birthday dinner, one of the guests hears his phone ring. He steps outside.

"It's Crazy," his girlfriend explains. Crazy was her name for her partner's ex, the mother of his child. Minutes pass. His girlfriend looks concerned.

Her partner comes back to the table and picks at the cake. "After all this, she thinks we might be able to reconcile," he says, making winding motions with his finger and pointing at his head. He's silent, angry, exhausted and bracing for the next round.

I think how, since the introduction of the Family Law Act that emphasised no fault, it's never been easier to divorce. And yet people are still voluntarily filing their allegations and defences of habitual drunkenness, abuse and adultery. To prove they are the better parent, the wronged wife, the harangued husband, more than a century after Bertha and Henry separated.

* * *

On a Saturday morning I climb the steep set of stairs from the pool. At the top of the cliff, some runners and

dog walkers are staring up at a scaffolding tower, slippery from overnight rain. I follow their gaze up high to a man in a white shirt and blue shorts, who looks like he should be sitting at a café table for brunch rather than climbing a precarious tower.

“Brother, come down,” a voice in the crowd pleads.

“These people pay their mortgages by ripping apart my kids’ lives,” he shouts back from his precarious perch.

Police sirens speed to the scene.

Order. Order!

Isn’t that the demand for calm?

Over a century has passed. I wonder what has really changed.

17.

In the Supreme Court of New South Wales, Matrimonial Causes Jurisdiction No. 4676 Between Bertha Marie Louise Lawson, petitioner, and Henry Lawson, respondent, Thursday, the fourth day of June in the year of our Lord, One thousand, nine hundred and three. [Written in ink calligraphy].¹⁸¹

Upon reading the petition filed herein filed on the sixth day of April last past and upon reading the notice of motion filed herein on the twenty eighth day of May last past and upon hearing Mr Robert Newburn Henderson attorney for the petitioner and Mr Hammond of counsel for the respondent who appeared to consent this court doth by consent without admissions Order and Decree that Bertha Marie Louise Lawson the petitioner herein be and she is hereby judicially separated from Henry Lawson the respondent and that the petitioner do have the sole custody of the children and that the respondent do have access to the children one afternoon in each week and this court doth further order the respondent to pay alimony to the petitioner and maintenance for the children at the rate of thirty shillings per week for a period of three months from the date of decree herein with leave reserved to Bertha Marie Louise Lawson the said petitioner to apply subsequently for further alimony for herself and maintenance for said children and this court doth further order that the said respondent do pay to Messieurs Beeby and Henderson the solicitors for the petitioner the sum of twenty guineas the petitioner's costs herein within the following fines, namely: seven pounds during the month of June, instant, seven pounds during the month of July next and seven pounds during the month of August next.

For the Court

Arthur Gluddington [unconfirmed spelling]

Deputy Registrar

* * *

On a winter's night I leave the train at Milsons Point station and walk along the hill road that cuts across to McMahons Point, where Henry lived, wandered and drank. Further up the hill, skyscraper signs neon the sky and, below, Luna Park's ferris wheel spins light beside the north approach to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Yachts spotlight the water that deepens into darkness beyond the bay. I walk past the park in which palm trees waver in the winter wind. I recognise them as the trees artist Brett Whiteley painted from his studio window beside the park.

I cut down a curled street, where Ruby and I first moved to after the divorce so I could be close to work. I remember her on the day of the move, still wearing her fairy dress from a birthday party. I later hung it on the clothesline in our shared backyard garden, signalling that a child had come to live in the block.

I emerge onto the main road that leads down to the ferry wharf and Henry's favourite pub, where he and the other separated men complained about their "Noble Women". Down at the pub, Henry found other men who were in his "domestic situation". His observant eye was still clear and perceptive. He was a great chronicler of pain and loss, especially at the bar. But bitterness was seeping in too, just like outside the Family Court, where husbands and wives huddle with their lawyers, who nod patiently as they talk in rushed, hushed

¹⁸¹ NRS 13495 Divorce case papers #4676 Bertha Lawson, 1903, State Records and Archives NSW.

tones on the steps.

Henry's court was the pub. He doesn't name it, but I wonder if it was the Blues Point Hotel; I remember it being down the road from the magazine office where I was news editor. We would sometimes go there for lunch, ignoring retired yachties hanging around the bar, or placing bets on Melbourne Cup Day. I read it was established in 1864, so it was a well-established haven for hurting men by the time Henry made it his local. He writes:

Our pub...is a small hotel on the top of a cliff with a view across a small bay, of almost the only bit of real bush headland left in the city's heart. It is frequented – haunted – by ancient mariners, wharf and waterside characters, carters, casual smugglers and such like – and strange to say, by a few ghosts of retired and forgotten bushmen. There are likewise a disbarred solicitor – an artist in somewhat the same domestic boat as the struck off gent; - a very cheerful professor of something or other – now he's call "The Pro" and one or two other improper persons of the like – to say nothing of one known as 'the Pote' behind his back, and 'Arry' to his face. We of the pub are mostly separated from our wives, and anything else (except beer) that makes life interesting. In certain stages of our sprees, which last through weeks, all women are either soulless or fiends with the tongues of hell-hags. In other words, our wives are, or were, all *Noble Women*.¹⁸²

I am meeting a friend and her colleague at this pub. We are noble women. I notice groups of men, dressed in work boots and hi-vis jackets, smoking on the terrace. It's been renovated in the years since I was last here. The wooden bar and beer-stained floor have been replaced by shiny silver shelves and an open area covered by smart blue-and-white carpet, with a small homage to the past – a photo in a picture frame of the old ferry wharf. A large TV is playing sport and there are men grouped around it, some in suits. It is still a blokey pub. Where you can have a beer, watch the footy and talk about "noble women".

I see an old neighbour, a retired academic, at the bar and he asks how my writing is going.

"Writing about Henry Lawson," I say. "This was his pub, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he drank here," he replies. "Have you seen his seat?"

"Here?" I ask.

"No, further up the hill. He used to sit there all the time".

My friends wave me over.

"Look at it," he says, going back to his table.

We order vodka and chips; my friend's colleague and I bond over gypsy exes. We compare where they are.

"Caribbean," I say of Dan. "And an ex-boyfriend is in France – possibly. He's a travel writer".

"Dubai, Paris," she ticks off. We laugh.

Later that night I hail a taxi, too tired to take two train trips home. As we accelerate up the hill, I see a stone seat with a plaque. It blurs behind us.

* * *

¹⁸² Quoted in Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer*, 209. The excerpt is not attributed to any particular title.

A letter to Henry Lawson from his solicitor, dated June 4, 1903:¹⁸³

Henry Lawson
Walker Hospital

Dear Sir,

Your and Mrs. Lawson's decree for judicial separation without admissions was made this morning by consent on terms filed in court. No evidence was heard and no pleadings read the whole affair occupying one minute.

I interviewed the reporters and also Mr. Saunders of the Star. At any rate there is very little to publish.

I received on your behalf £2 for Mrs. Lawson on Tuesday and paid same to Mr. Henderson.

Yours truly, James Elphinstone

* * *

Despite all the hurdles and the laborious necessity of proof, in the thirty years since Mary Kirkham Wilson's petition in 1873 to Lawson vs. Lawson in 1903, the number of applications had leapt from six to 400 couples a year.

The 1899 act had already wised up to the hiding and selling of assets to avoid alimony; it stated in clause 59(1):

Where it appears to the Court that a sale of real estate is about to be made with intent to defeat a petitioner's claim in respect of costs alimony or the maintenance of the children or damages on the ground of adultery, the Court may by order restrain the sale to be paid into the Court to be dealt with as the Court directs.¹⁸⁴

On June 4, 1903, already weary of subpoenaing deserted husbands, seeking evidence from ship captains and receiving the assurances of adulteresses, Justice George Simpson, peering over a moustache that rivalled Henry's, only wanted the terms of settlement. That Henry would not admit to any allegations of violence, that he wanted his marriage to continue, was now an irritation rather than an obstacle.

A month after Bertha lodged the judicial separation, *The Critic*, barely bothering to conceal Henry's identity, had revealed in its edition of 30 May:

A certain Australian writer has been lately gravitating from the lock-up to the hospital with surprising swiftness. His wife has left him and intends to apply for a judicial separation. Some folks have been writing sympathetically about the strain of overwork that drives so many Australasian literary men astray. It is not overwork, but over drink which is to blame as a rule. The trouble is, to paraphrase Kendall: The lot of beer that waits upon the man of letters here.¹⁸⁵

Unconstrained by the later Family Law Act, which upon its inception in 1975 prevented the publication of family law matters so as to "enhance the dignity of the divorce process" the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the Lawson hearing on June 5, 1903, along with two other cases heard in the Divorce Court the day before Lawson vs. Lawson. Florence Lamb had sought a divorce from her husband, Robert Kitson

¹⁸³ James Elphinstone, Letter to Henry Lawson, 4 June, 1903, in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895–1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

¹⁸⁴ Matrimonial Causes Act 1899, S.59

¹⁸⁵ 'Personal Gossip,' in *The Critic*, 30 May, 1903, 8.

Lamb, absent in South Africa (the case was adjourned until production of further evidence), and Emily Lennon had sought dissolution of her marriage on the grounds of desertion. In the latter case, His Honour suggested that:

the petition should be amended, as the evidence in support of the ground of desertion was not sufficient, whereas there was evidence of the respondent's drunkenness and leaving the petitioner without support for three years and upwards.¹⁸⁶

The *Sydney Morning Herald* offered spectators the last word in the Lawson case: “By consent a decree for judicial separation was granted in the case of Bertha Marie Louise Lawson, formerly Bredt, versus Henry Lawson, author and journalist”.¹⁸⁷

The marriage was now reduced to a file number. The separation option allowed for couples to live legally apart, and for child and spousal support to be paid; but it was a marriage in name only, literally. Filed at the State Records, the document is rolled up with Bertha’s affidavit and tied with a pink ribbon – a present from the past, ceremoniously and carefully labelled in calligraphy, its beauty hiding the ugliness of the events that had caused it to be written.

* * *

Awarded a judicial separation of “*mensa et thoro*” – Latin, meaning “from table and bed” – Bertha was now formally separated from Henry. The updated 1899 Matrimonial Causes Act preferred “dissolution of marriage” to “divorce”. She had her judicial separation, and with that the assurance of child support and the ability to keep any assets that she acquired from now on. There weren’t any assets anyway. They’d lost their furniture because of unpaid rent.

She recalls in her memoir:¹⁸⁸

We remained in Manly living with a very kind woman, Mrs. Ellison, who took care of the children while I went to work. Harry often came to see us but it was useless taking up house again as he was quite penniless and the children had to be provided for. He undoubtedly had some resentment about this situation, but I told him he would always be welcome to come and see us. And so the years passed on.

But before those years passed, how did she spend the rest of the day after the judicial separation was heard? Did she feel relieved? Sad? Numb?

I was dazed after my brief court hearing, conducted while Ruby was at school. I pretended it was normal. Afterwards, before going back to work, I went to my lunchtime yoga. I must have looked distracted. I think I stopped mid-pose.

“Are you alright?” the yoga instructor asked.

“Yes. Just got divorced,” I whispered back.

“Oh,” he said, his serenity jolted. “Well, um, take it easy”.

¹⁸⁶ ‘Divorce Court,’ in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 June, 1903, 8.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 81.

18.

Letter to Henry Lawson written from Bertha's lodging, 397 1/2 Dowling Street, Moore Park, dated Monday, June 15, 1903:¹⁸⁹

Harry,

Your letter has just come.

Your papers are not here. I looked for them before. There are also a good many of my private letters and papers missing, and I thought they may be amongst your things. Re the children. I will not consent to let them go. Not through any paltry feelings of revenge, but as a matter of duty. You see, you left me, with these two little children. I was turned into the world, with 1/6 and not a shelter or food for them. I had to pawn my wedding ring to pay for a room. And then had to leave the little children shut up in the room, while I sought for work. And when I got work to do I had to leave them all day, rush home to give them their meals. And back to work again. And mind you, I was suffering torture all the time with toothache, and had to tramp the cold wet streets all day, knowing unless I earnt some money that day the children would go hungry to bed. (I was a fortnight working before Robertson gave Miss [Rose]Scott that money.) I had no money to pay a dentist. (I wrote to you at P.A. Hospital telling you, you were forcing me to place the children in the Benevolent Asylum and you took no notice of the letter. I went to the Dental Hospital and had a tooth extracted. They have broken part of the jaw bone. And I go into hospital on Wednesday and go under an operation to have the dead bone removed. The children will be well looked after. While I am away I have to pay a pound where they are going. So I trust you will endeavour to send Mr Henderson some more again this week. You know my condition and I am certainly not fit at the present moment to struggle for a living.

As far as the case goes, the sooner it is over the better. You alone have forced this step. God alone knows how often I have forgiven you and how hard I struggled for you. And how have you treated me. Harry there is no power on the earth will ever reunite us. You are dead to me as far as affection goes. The suffering I have been through lately has killed any thought of feeling I may have had for you.

When you have proved yourself a better man and not a low drunkard you shall see your children as often as you like. Until then, I will not let you see them. They have nearly forgotten the home scenes when you were drinking — and I will not let them see you drinking again. I train them to have the same love for you as they have for me. And if baby's prayers are heard in heaven, you should surely be different, to what you have been. They will have to decide the right and wrong between us, when they are old enough to understand. I think you are very cruel to make the statements you do about me. You know Harry as well I do they are absolutely false. Why don't you be a man? And if you want to talk to people of your troubles, tell them drink is the sole cause. Do not shield yourself behind a woman. Mr Henderson cannot influence me one way or another, nor any one else. You had your chance to sign a mutual separation and you would not do it. I dread the court case and publicity more than you do. Still I will not draw back again. And I only wish it was settled and over to day. I am so weary of struggling against pain and sorrow that I do not give a tinkers curse for anything — or anybody.

Bertha.

* * *

On a windy spring day, clutching my dress to stop it blowing up in the breeze, I walk in search of another address that Bertha lists in her letters, in which facts drift like the pollen on the path under my feet.

¹⁸⁹ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, 6 October, 1906, in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895–1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

In South Dowling Street, the terraces are rusted and dusted by the constant traffic driving past. One of them is undergoing renovation; I peek through the open door and see new floorboards, a glossy fireplace and rickety steps to the second floor.

Walking further down the street, I pause by 397. Two plane trees have grown as tall as the terrace, and the balcony has been walled in with glass. I think I've found Bertha's home, until my gaze shifts next door and I see a crucial fraction – 397½ – written on the window above the door.

I absorb the past. The terrace is painted an undercoat pink, with a green corrugated iron balcony, windowed-in like its neighbour. Plants entwine around the security bars and large council garbage bins blight the entrance. Upstairs the tree branches reflect on the windowpanes. It was from inside here, beyond its sky-blue front door, that Bertha writes her angry letter to Henry about her having to pawn her wedding ring and leave the children shut up in her room while she looked for work.

Then I remember her daughter's later reflection, that her mother was sometimes overly dramatic. Bertha's mother lived in Sydney – surely that was an alternative to leaving them alone, or threatening to place them in the asylum? And what about her sister, Hilda?

But then my conjectures come up against one solid fact: Bertha is pregnant with her third child. Perhaps she isn't thinking at all about anything except survival.

I will not draw back again.

* * *

Letter sent by Bertha Lawson from the office of her lawyer, Henderson, to Henry Lawson on July 25, 1903:¹⁹⁰

Harry,

I am forced to write to you. I do not think you realize my position. I will be laid up either the end of October, or the first week in November. I must pay two guineas into the Lodge by the 13th of next month or I will not be able to receive medical attendance. There is the nurse to engage, and all the sewing to do, you know I do not have any baby clothes. I want you to let me have ten pounds – it will take every penny of that to pay the expenses of my confinement.

The nurse will be two guineas a week and I will have to pay a pound a week for someone to look after the children and then there will be other expenses. I think considering what Dr Brannand¹⁹¹ told you and after all your promises, it is most cruel that I should suffer all that agony again. If it were not for the sake of Jim and Bertha I should not go through with it.

Another thing is I have to solely depend on you for an existence until after the baby is born. You have disbarred me from earning a living for myself ever now. I cannot walk far or stand very long and it is not a cheerful prospect to look forward to knowing as you know well I will very likely die.

I cannot save anything out of the thirty shillings a week. I have seven shillings rent to pay. 10 / - every week to pay off the dentist bill. That is seven pounds ten, I have already paid two pounds ten off it and I have twelve shillings left for food & clothing and other expenses for myself & two children – it does not look as "If I were one of the most extravagant woman" does it!

The children are well and happy. I do trust you will send me the money shortly. So I can commence my sewing and I must pay the lodge money. You promised I should have every comfort. I am not asking you for that but the bare necessary's [sic].

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Dr H.J Brannand is thought to have been her doctor. See 'Letters of Bertha Lawson,' *La Trobe Journal*, No.28 (1981): 76-83.

Your wife
Bertha Lawson

* * *

I go back through the letters written in 1903, stepping on the drifting facts to consider each one. There is no clear mention of a baby until June; but in an earlier letter, written on 24 April, she told Henry that unless he sends money she will be forced to place the children:

in the Benevolent Asylum. I don't care about myself but I cannot see my children starve. I think it is dreadfully cruel for any Mother to have to part with her children let alone be placed in the position I am in.¹⁹²

Initially I interpreted her position to be financial, but now I understand how truly precarious her position is. I check the Benevolent Asylum's entries in their admissions and discharge ledger. The entry, on Wednesday, April 5, 1903, is typical: "Father Frederick sent to Gaol for four months for neglecting to support. Mother dead. Children committed by Newtown Police Court".¹⁹³ There is no mention in its 1903 rollcall of destitution and abandonment of a Bertha (Barta) and Joseph (Jim) Lawson.

In July, Bertha warns Henry that she will be "laid up the end of October or the first week of November". She reiterates clearly now: "I don't think you realise my position". I count nine months back on my fingers to summer, 1903. It's February, and they are still living in Manly. A newspaper article gossiped that Mrs Lawson and Henry were sighted holding hands as they strolled around the beach cliffs.

She must have conceived during this brief post-fall reunion. However, in April she filed her affidavit alleging cruelty and drunkenness. Having had two children, she must surely have suspected the significance of those telltale signs: the missed periods; the swollen breasts; the heightened sense of smell, which transforms the slightest scent into a stench. Or perhaps she tried to ignore them.

I remember in my own life a strange queasiness that was brought on by Dan blowing bubble gum. Then, on a horse ride on a weekend away in country NSW, I wanted to sleep by the reeds in the stream in the sun. Returning to Sydney, my period late, I did a pregnancy test. "I better get a job," Dan said.

I imagine Bertha blanching at food, but putting her upset tummy down to stress. Then the realisation that she was indeed – to use the quaint expression – *with child*. Perhaps that's what drove her to the lawyers, to pin down an agreement for continual support; but there's no mention of pregnancy enhancing her vulnerability in the April affidavit.

I feel for Bertha. What a situation to be in now, let alone over a century ago.

I think back to Manly Beach, where the third baby began. Bertha mentioned doctors in a more loving letter to Henry, undated but thought to be written in March, asking him to be nice to a "Dr Hall". "I owe Dr Hall my reason and my life," she told him. I stop on this fact.

¹⁹² Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, April 1903. in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895–1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

¹⁹³ Sydney Benevolent Asylum Records, 1813–1995, MLMSS 6091, State Library of NSW.

She'd had a relapse in previous months, but it's unclear if that was in 1903 or prior to Henry's fall, when he told friend and theatre producer, Bland Holt, in a half-finished letter about "getting my wife into an asylum". In December, in the days after Henry's fall, she mentions in her list of accumulating bills that she owes Dr Hall and the chemist a guinea each. But Bertha implies in her correspondence with Henry that her relapse was after his fall. In her memoir, she recalls of 1903:

Those were the blackest days of our lives, and the cloud did not lift for a long time. Soon after he left Sydney Hospital, we lost our furniture from unpaid rent. Then Harry went into Prince Alfred Hospital for treatment. Then I became seriously ill.¹⁹⁴

Somewhere – there are so many names drifting around in my head – she mentions a "Nurse Latreille's" Private Hospital in Manly.¹⁹⁵ It matches St Ronan's, a large two-storey Federation home overlooking Sydney Harbour.

I'm trying to think like a pregnant woman with two children and an alcoholic husband who can't support the present family, let alone another babe. I'm thinking how scared and vulnerable she must feel as the children clamour around her for attention.

The baby is coming. The father is not. What do you do? Do you try to reconcile again for the baby's sake? Or is it too late?

Too late.

Henry, I have to depend on you.

I imagine her lying in hospital, hearing the harbour swell onto the beach.

¹⁹⁴ Lawson, *Memories*, 117.

¹⁹⁵ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 80.

19.

If Bertha was depressed before, now she is angry. I read over the letter addressed from her lawyer's office again. "I think considering what Dr Brennan told you and after all your promises, it is most cruel that I should suffer that agony again. If it wasn't for the children I would not go through with it".

Each word feels like a clue. I wonder if she means that she would not go through with having the baby? Abortion was an open, but illegal secret, especially in the bohemian world that Henry and Bertha inhabited. Back in the State Library of NSW, I read a leather-bound report, *Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales*, published in 1904.¹⁹⁶ A witness told the Commission he had treated 150 women suffering from "the effects of abortion" at his hospital. I think of Hannah dying only the previous year, three days after she had collapsed from a feverish infection.

Despite his prominent Macquarie Street practice, Bertha's doctor, Henry Wolverine Brennan, was not one of the doctors, midwives, pharmacists, undertakers or religious witnesses who gave evidence to the Royal Commission that investigated the prevalence of abortion and contraceptive practices among women in NSW. These women and their midwives were, predictably, being blamed for the declining birth rate despite many being in Bertha's position, where they were reluctantly increasing it.

The majority of abortions, I read in another book, were performed by midwives separated from their husbands, who needed to earn a living. Abortions were often attempted in the second trimester using a long, crude instrument or a toxic concoction of herbs, sent by mail order to desperate women in rural areas. I read that Detective Sergeant Sawtell told the Commission that in Sydney there were at least 36 abortionists, but he estimated it was ten times that number. When complications occurred, like Hannah experienced, doctors who suspected their patient had had an abortion would make saving her life a higher priority than making accusations. I read later that a doctor told the Royal Commission that, if you suspected they had had an abortion, "you are forced to attend them through".

I re-read Bertha's letter:

You have disbarred me from earning a living myself ever now. I cannot sit or stand very long and it is not a cheerful prospect to look forward to, knowing as you know well, I will very likely die.

I wonder if she's being dramatic again; but then I remember it's 1903.

The only thing certain is that Bertha and Henry's last baby was stillborn sometime in late 1903, a few months it seems after their judicial separation.

I try to find a record of their baby's birth; it's mentioned in nearly all biographical accounts of Henry Lawson, as well as in Bertha's memoirs: "Our third child died at birth. Black days, indeed!"¹⁹⁷ But no details are given of where, when or what happened. A nurse would have certified the stillbirth and no other notification was required. The lack of birth or death registration was raised at the Royal Commission, because of its

¹⁹⁶ *Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales*. (Sydney: Government Printer, 1904).

¹⁹⁷ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 80.

potential to conceal infanticide and midwifery negligence. According to the Commission, over ten percent of babies died before their first birthday and, of those, 50 per cent died within three months. The risk of mortality was double if the child was illegitimate.

I scroll through the flickering microfilm of the admission records of the closest hospital to Bertha, the Royal Hospital for Women at Paddington, and its associated institution, the Thomas Street Lying In Hospital for destitute and single mothers. They were both run by the Benevolent Society. On the microfilm, emotional lives are compressed into crisp factlets, such as: "Single. Pregnant. Alleged father. Emergency. Married. Deserted".¹⁹⁸ Although Bertha's name doesn't appear in the reams of handwritten entries, the admission and discharge records cryptically refer to stillbirths suffered by other women at Flinton, the original name for the Royal Hospital for Women. A typical entry reads: "Discharged: Mack, Bella. No Infant".¹⁹⁹

"The little one that we lost was born and the time came of our parting," Bertha confirms in her memoir. "For sorrow had come to us, and difficulties".²⁰⁰

The sorrow.

¹⁹⁸ Benevolent Society of New South Wales records 1813–1995, MLMSS 6091, State Library of NSW.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Lawson, *Memories*, 117.

20.

Handwritten letter to Henry from Bertha, dated October 6, 1906:²⁰¹

Dear Lawson,

Re the amount to be paid by you for the children. I wish you would consider the matter seriously. It is impossible for me to keep them at Boarding School unless you pay the amount. I only ask you to pay for their Board, as I manage their clothes, education, etc. Angus & Robertson's term will be up next week, and I have to look to you for the weekly amount, and do not wish to have any unpleasantness or court proceedings over the matter. So I trust that you will realise the position. I have struggled hard enough the last three years and have kept the children well. But I find I cannot do it, and cannot face the worry. I have enough Business worries without the incessant anxiety of providing the necessary amount for the children's weekly account.

Trusting you will consider this matter in a proper light.

I remain yours, etc.

B.L

* * *

The letters between Bertha and Henry disappear from the archives for three years, so I return to her memoirs. Bertha says proudly that she found work at a little-known bookseller, Charles Stuart & Company. The only record of their activities at State Archives is in the Index to Register of Firms. The company is listed as a "Book importer and publisher" and registered in July 1903 at 42 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, so Bertha must have joined the firm in late 1903.

I had been earning a living for myself and the children as a saleswoman for Stuart and Co. As soon as I was well, I went back to this work, which was interesting and entailed much travelling, taking me all over New South Wales and once, to New Zealand.

I'm not sure if her becoming "well" is an oblique reference to her recovery from her stillbirth trauma, or her earlier "rest" by the harbour in Manly. But she was well and working; not doing domestic work, which was the main sphere of employment for women at the turn of the century, but engaged as a professional.

I imagine Bertha coming home, yawning. To care for the children while she was travelling away from Sydney, at first she must have relied on someone like Mrs Ellison, the "very kind woman" they had previously lived with at Manly, or perhaps her mother. But then she realised they would be better off attending a boarding school, where they would be supervised. In a letter written later, in 1914, from Jim to his father, he refers to leaving "Grammar" and now being at an "Agricultural school". I'm clutching at those floating facts again, as they might point to him attending either the prestigious "Shore" – the North Shore Church of England Grammar in North Sydney or Sydney Grammar in the city.

I'm surprised at this decision though, because a boarding school would have been expensive. It seems unrealistic to ask Henry to pay, until I consider that Bertha has obviously been doing so for some time.

The prevailing narrative of Bertha is that she relied on an unreliable husband, and punished him when

²⁰¹ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, 6 October, 1906, in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895–1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

he didn't provide. I think that's unfair. She is part of a new class of women – the working single mothers, who are protected by the courts but pushed to the limit every day.

* * *

I meet with Mariana in the city, where she works for a wholesale fashion brand in a street lined with mannequins in windows. Boxes of clothes wrapped in plastic surround her. Ruby browses through the racks of unpacked designs, half-listening as she tries clothes on.

After six months' separation, Mariana moved back from the beach cottage to the family home and her husband of twenty years. Then she left him again for a year, before returning and reuniting once more. It's a pattern she acknowledges: "There's loyalty," she says and then pauses. "Twenty years. Better the devil you know".

"I don't think so," I say, doubtful. "But I understand".

The divorce for me was so certain. Yet love and loyalty tangle and strangle. Who was I to judge her for giving it another go? And a single mother is such an ironic description, because you are not single at all – you have a child or, like Mariana, four children.

Ruby, still sorting through the clothes, listens as Mariana continues:

"When I left, it was a real uplifting feeling of 'I finally did it'. There was a wonderful feeling of totally having a say in your environment. I didn't have to put up with his cigarettes, although my son was smoking. I didn't have to deal with all the previous shit. But dealing with the children, and their needs, and working was difficult. And that was just to pay bills. There was nothing left over. I didn't have it in me.

"There was no one supervising the kids. Because I was doing a job that was one-on-one, I had to be there for every minute of the money I earned. It was exhausting. I remember coming home, then I'd round up the kids – Sophia was only nine and roaming the suburb – and cook dinner. It was out of control. I found that impossible. My children were unsupervised. It didn't feel like it was going anywhere good".

Her business partner joins our conversation: "That's the situation for a lot of working mothers". Mariana's partner isn't separated, but she's had long periods of sole parenting while her husband worked in China. "I was working so many hours and the kids were catching the bus at all hours and Amy was coming home at ten years old and cooking. On their own, the kids were turning into little adults. You need an extended family".

Mariana nods. "There were the older children, but they didn't want to supervise. They were doing their own thing. I ended up with a massive blood disorder. I became unwell because I was so stressed out". She turns to me: "I remember thinking of you, that you did that for years. I think you found it so stressful and challenging to be working full-time, and looking after a child on your own".

"I felt like I didn't do anything well," I reply. Ruby is listening now, so I ask her: "Do you remember what I was like, day to day?" I brace myself for what she will say.

"When I was younger?" Ruby asks. "I just remember you – mum – as mum," she says, with teenage bluntness. "I remember childcare. Being the last person to be picked up".

“Sorry,” I say.

I remember the panic of trying to get to different childcare centres on time. Skidding down the school hill in the dark. I remember her head on my lap as I finished an interview one night. I remember Italian dinners at a restaurant where we went so often after I picked her up that they knew her name and her favourite carbonara pasta. I remember the blinding panic attacks that became as constant as the rushing.

“I felt like Ruby was always missing out, or work was missing out,” I say.

“It made you unwell,” Mariana says.

“Yes,” I say.

21.

Excerpt from Henry Lawson's *To Jim*, which was included in his *When I Was King and Other Verses*, 1905:²⁰²

I gaze upon my son once more,
With eyes and heart that tire,
As solemnly he stands before
The screen drawn round the fire;
With hands behind clasped hand in hand,
Now loosely and now fast –
Just as his fathers used to stand
For generations past.

A fair and slight and childish form,
And big brown thoughtful eyes –
God help him! for a life of storm
And stress before him lies:
A wanderer and a gipsy wild,
I've learnt the world and know,
For I was such another child –
Ah, many years ago!
But in those dreamy eyes of him
There is no hint of doubt –
I wish that you could tell me, Jim,
The things you dream about.
Dream on, my son, that all is true
And things not what they seem –
'Twill be a bitter day for you
When wakened from your dream.

...These lines I write with bitter tears
And failing heart and hand,
But you will read in after years,
And you will understand:
You'll hear the slander of the crowd,
They'll whisper tales of shame,
But days will come when you'll be proud
To bear your father's name.

* * *

When Bertha Comes to Tea:²⁰³

When Bertha comes to tea
(The kettle sings in glee)
The cups and saucers clatter
As they hear her chatter, chatter,
And you wonder what's the matter
When Bertha comes to tea.

When Bertha comes to tea
(Her age, I think, is three)
She keeps you in a flutter,
Cutting cake and bread and butter.

²⁰² Lawson, 'To Jim.'

²⁰³ Henry Lawson, 'Barta,' in *The Bulletin*, 10 December, 1903, 3.

"Where does it go?" you mutter,
When Bertha comes to tea.

When Bertha comes to tea
(She isn't shy, not she)
The house cat sees, clearly,
She loves him very dearly,
But — he's suffocated, nearly,
When Bertha comes to tea.

When Bertha comes to tea
(Along with you and me)
She's sure to bring her dolly;
Then away with melancholy,
And let us all be jolly
When Bertha comes to tea.

* * *

I wake up to hot, wet mornings. I keep thinking about the children – Barta and Jim. The kiddies. Bertha's letters show, at least those in the later years, that the children missed Henry, and wanted him. She wavers between protecting the children and promoting their relationship. She wavers a lot. Henry, are you *yourself*? I realise that is code for drinking.

Barta later recalls a day when she was small and they met Henry on the old Spit tram. After it rattled around the cliffs they went for a picnic on the rocks at the Spit:²⁰⁴

When I think of my memories of Dad, there are so very few. My first meeting with him appears to be on the back of an old Spit tram. At least, that's when I first clearly remember him. He seemed very tall, and was dressed in comfortable old clothes, and he got on a stop or two after we did. He had a large cane picnic hamper, the square sort with the skewered lid. He sat this on the floor and took me on his knee. We were making for the tiny beach on the other side of Middle Harbour, a little rocky curve long buried under the highway. He had brought chicken, and some other treat for Jim and I. He loved to be responsible for a day's outing. I remember I was busily exploring some rocks, while mother bathed and Jim went wandering off and I fell in. My wails brought Dad flying. I had cut my foot not badly, but I remember how upset he was, tearing a handkerchief into strips and binding it firmly while he comforted and quieted me.

She remembers him brushing his moustache away when he stooped to kiss her. Their family outing – nuclear, secure – by the time she wrote this down had been packed up as a memory. Barta recalls that Henry visited them at their Walker Street home, which Bertha had moved to sometime in the previous three years. Henry is there on the periphery of their lives. According to his letters, he was just around the corner with Mrs Byers. There are times – interspersed between the intense hostility, the drunkenness – when it seems they tried to be a family.

Reading about their day in the unpublished memoirs of Henry's daughter, I wonder what her mother Bertha remembered? I wonder how she felt when she saw other picnicking families packing up their baskets and leaving together? Did seeing families upset her? Did she, when Henry was elsewhere, feel envy when she

²⁰⁴ Lawson [Jago], Unpublished Notes.

saw fathers with their children curled securely in their arms with the dog trotting beside them? Or was she cynical, knowing that the veneer of family is fragile?

I work out that Barta was three at the time of the separation, and had previously been separated from her mother while Bertha was hospitalised in London. Jim was four. In these early years, there's always acceptance by children of what is.

"I didn't understand it until I was older, until I was ten or something," Ruby told me in Mariana's shop. "I don't remember a change – Dad was always away, so it wasn't different".

Ruby was living in a world in which her friends also had divorced parents, but I wonder how Barta and Jim felt. Perhaps they were protected by Bertha's judicial separation. They could continue to say, "My parents are still married" if someone dared ask, even though legally it was a separation ratified by the dreaded Divorce Court.

Barta remembers a gentle father more than a divorce:

...He had marvellous eyes. You could go on looking down and down in them. He liked to dress in a slightly old fashioned way. He wore dignified high collars and he was never without his stick. He was a far more powerful personality than any sentimental dreaming could make of him. He was a law unto himself and often difficult but just as often warm and friendly, full of laughter, kindness and quick understanding as he always was with us.

...He could be restless, nervously impatient rearing as a thoroughbred, very angry at anything he thought was blind unfairness, but just as ready with sorrow and apology.²⁰⁶

* * *

Henry has survived another winter, standing above Lady Macquarie's Road with his mate and dog. The eucalyptus leaves are dry, the fresh tar warms the paths, and bird droppings dry on his pants. A spider weaves a web on the sandstone plinth.

Because of his recurring child support debts, it is easy to dismiss Henry as an uncaring father. I realise I've made that mistake already, just as I'm empathetic with Bertha's pressures rather than dismissing her as the bitch. Bertha tries to be diplomatic in public, even if her letters demand money and pleas for him to see the children. He does seem to be around; it's just that you aren't sure when, or where. Bertha writes:

Harry often came to see us but it was quite useless taking up house again as he was quite penniless, and the children had to be provided for. He undoubtedly had some resentment about this situation but I told him he was always welcome. At heart he was a good husband and father, except when the temptation to drink was too strong.

I realise that there is a lost narrative here, of Henry as a separated father. I read his poem dedicated to his son, *To Jim*. Its lyrical lines reveal his anxiety about his future relationship with his son. I read the optimistic sweetness of *When Bertha Comes to Tea*. I also remember him pleading with his wife that she at least let him see the children, in a letter written as the separation spiralled to court.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*

His daughter's memories in later life recall the sporadic, spontaneous generosity of a father showing love to his children in a way they could recognise. This is far more memorable than the cost of living that so consumed her mother. I imagine the frustration Bertha felt when Henry arrived with gifts or grand gestures – a duck for the table; a doll for Barta – instead of cash for boring necessities.

I remember Dan arriving with a giant pink stuffed unicorn that sprawled across Ruby's bed. "Guilt present," his sister observed. Sometimes Henry came with just his humour and intellect, and helped with schoolwork, and that seems to be remembered most vividly of all.

In the Mitchell Library, the Lawson family archival boxes are crammed with Barta's letters to her mother, with notes about her parents and with recollections that reveal the reality she later saw, in contrast with what she wanted to see as a child who loved both her parents.

All divorced parents know that their children will eventually have their own contested versions to tell. Few are left in libraries.

22.

Excerpts from *One Hundred and Three*, composed 1908 and published in *The Rising of the Court* (1910):²⁰⁷

With the frame of a man, and the face of a boy, and a manner strangely wild,
And the great, wide wondering innocent eyes of a silent suffering child,
With his hideous dress and his heavy boots, he drags to Eternity –
And the Warder says, in a softened tone, “Keep step, One Hundred and Three”.

’Tis a ghastly travesty of drill – or ghastly farce of work –
But One Hundred and Three, he catches step with a start, a shuffle and a jerk
’Tis slow starvation in separate cells, and a widow’s son is he
And the widow, she drank before he was born – (Keep Step, One Hundred and
Three!).

They shut a man in the four-by-eight, with a six inch slit for air,
Twenty-three hours of the twenty-four, to brood on his virtues there
And the dead stone walls and the iron door close in as an iron band
On eyes that followed the distant haze far out on the level land.

Bread and water and hominy, and a scrag of meat and a spud
A Bible and thin flat book of rules, to cool a strong man’s blood;
They take the spoon from the cell at night – and a stranger might think it odd;
But a man might sharpen his floor and go to his own Great God.

One Hundred and Three, it is hard to believe that you saddled your horse at dawn;
There were girls that rode through the bush at eve, and girls who lolled on the
lawn
There were picnic parties in sunny bays, and ships on the shining sea;
There were foreign ports in the glorious days – (Hold up, One Hundred and Three!).

The great round church with its volume of sound, where we dare not turn our eyes
They take us there from our separate hells to sing of Paradise.
In all the creeds there is hope and doubt, but of this is no doubt:
That starving prisoners faint in church and the warders carry them out.

* * *

Rushing, always rushing. I climb the curling stone stairs, taking my shoes off as I go, and hurry across the chapel to a makeshift canvas tent. A moment later, I’m ready.

Sun spills through the chapel’s upper windows, striping the wooden floor. “Sorry I’m late,” I say to the life-drawing tutor. “Traffic”.

“It happens”.

“Hair up or down?” I ask.

“Up,” he says.

I knot my hair into a rough bun. Hair obscures bone structure.

The others in the room chat and yawn. I keep the kimono closed. Students at the National Art School, they concentrate on their pencils, their charcoal and their coffee. I stare at the sandstone. It’s not personal,

²⁰⁷ Henry Lawson, ‘One Hundred and Three,’ in *The Bulletin*, 26 November, 1908, 39. Also appears in *The Rising of the Court and Other Sketches in Prose and Verse*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1910), 111–112.

just protocol. The model must not be approached by students, nor photographed, nor treated disrespectfully. The model in turn must not walk around in the nude unnecessarily.

The tutor nods. I am “the”, not she or her. A living sculpture who was late.

I untie the sash of the white kimono and drop the gown to the floor. It lies in a crumpled pool of discarded modesty. I stand still, one arm behind my back, my head down, feeling the nearby heater on my toes.

The students pick up their pencils and point them at my body. They frown and squint. They scrutinise my breast, analyse my thigh, and assess my bottom.

I breathe, counting the seconds. At sixty, I turn to the left. A rustle of paper means the students have turned with me. Fast drawings are supposed to capture the essence of the body.

Three minutes.

I look up. Prior to the National Art School, the chapel was part of Darlinghurst Gaol. A jagged line scars the sandstone wall, marking the former mezzanine level on which were assembled for prayer the female prisoners, whose notes fluttered down to the men below while a soprano convicted of infanticide sang hymns. Poet and prisoner Henry Lawson writes about the chapel in his poem *One Hundred and Three*.

The tutor nods again. He wants another pose.

My head turns to the front. I stare at the stained-glass windows, glowing with the morning light. They were created by the convicted bushranger Frank Pearson and the “Demon Dentist” Henry Bertrand. The windows depict the parables of The Lost Coin, The Prodigal Son and The Lost Sheep. With my hands clasped across my legs, I read the abridged inscription stained into the glass: “I say unto you that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety & nine just persons which need no repentance”.

I breathe, stand still and gaze at redemption.

* * *

After our separation, I registered with the Child Support Agency to receive parenting payments from the government. I am fortunate to live in an era that recognises single parents’ needs, although there was constant debate about the amount I was entitled to. I had found a job as a part-time journalist; supplemented by art modelling and the odd freelance article, plus help from my family and, later, my partner, this meant I was not totally reliant on the government or on my gypsy ex.

The CSA officer did his best. “Where is your husband?” he asked.

“The Caribbean, I think,” I say. “He travels around”. Whenever Ruby asked, usually I stabbed at the approximate region.

“I’ll check if we have reciprocal agreements there”. He returns, pleased. “Barbados? Is he there?”

“Sometimes,” I say, trying to be helpful too.

“Florida? We have a reciprocal arrangement with the USA”.

“I’d like to have a regular payment from him, but his earnings are all over the place and he travels all

the time...He's a musician".

"Oh," he says. "A musician".

He seemed genuinely concerned about my daughter's welfare. I was surprised, thinking that hearing parents complain and protest day after day would jade you. But he and I both knew reciprocal agreements were complicated and difficult to enforce. As tempting as it was to enforce a regular payment for budgeting, as Bertha had needed to do, I knew that, until Dan was actually living in one place for an extended time, the amount that would be imposed wouldn't be worth the difficulty of obtaining it under the various international jurisdictions. And all that would flow from this effort would be resentment rather than money. It wasn't practical, given the situation.

Nevertheless, the CSA officer asked for estimates of income for both of us anyway, so he could calculate the minimal amount of child support that Dan should be paying. When his estimate finally arrived in the post, I glance at it and then throw it on my pile of bills.

* * *

After rain hits Sydney with a three-day storm, I am walking down a city railway tunnel to the station and notice a woman sitting hunched on a milk crate with a styrofoam cup and a hand-scrawled sign lying on the tiles in front of her: "I'M HOMELESS DUE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. I'M SIX MONTHS PREGNANT. I'VE BEEN ON THE STREETS FOR THE LAST FEW NIGHTS AND I'M PETRIFIED".

I stop. There have been increasing numbers of homeless women seen around the city since refuges were recently closed after a government funding cut. Her womb bulges over her grey trackpants spotted with dirt. "I've been trying all these places," she tells me. "They are all full because of the storm, or they are just full". She can't try anymore because her phone was stolen on the streets.

She borrows my phone and calls another refuge. She looks exhausted. Happy face tattoos decorate her arms.

* * *

I imagine Bertha's mother whispering the same to her as my mother often did to me in those first few years: "Do you need money, love?" I envision her sister quietly opening her purse with her gloves to give her some shillings. And Bertha taking them with an embarrassed thanks, or a snappy no, or a grateful hug – depending on her pride and her mood.

I wonder if seeing her sister's struggles influenced Hilda. In August 1908, Hilda filed her own judicial separation, petition 6506,²⁰⁸ against her husband, citing his adultery with Nellie Louisa Anderson; but then she decided to cancel the application just four days later. She remained "married", despite the fact that Lang lived with Nellie and had a son by her two years later. Lang, at that time a real estate agent, only returned to his

²⁰⁸ NRS 13495 Divorce case papers #6506 Hilda Lang, 1908, State Records and Archives of NSW.

wife after Nellie died in 1910; but, with Hilda by his side, he rose to Premier of NSW.

There's a later picture of Hilda – confident, blonde and wearing a luxe fur coat, the wife of the most important man in the state. Her husband's son came to live with them after his mother's death and was absorbed into the status of the family.

"I don't understand how he became Premier, with that in his past," I said recently to my partner, explaining what I'd discovered. As a history buff, and in the midst of a divorce himself after a long separation, he was interested in my research.

"It wasn't talked about. And the Opposition wouldn't have lowered themselves to make a point of it. It wasn't the done thing. Look at Ben Chifley. Even though it was known about him and his secretary, he still became PM," he counters.

"But divorce court proceedings were reported in the papers. It was so public," I say.

"Only if your case went to court," he corrects. "Why do you think Bertha was so unpopular?"

I see what he's saying. You were supposed to shut up and deal with it privately, like Hilda did, pulling back before the daily divorce court listings spread the news.

"I don't know if Bertha had a choice," I say. "They had no money. The bailiffs came all the time. Henry was an alcoholic. Whereas Hilda...there was money". Enough it seems, to support two homes in Sydney – one for his family, and one for his mistress and their son until her death.

Without Bertha's family and her work, I wonder how much worse off Bertha would have been. And I wonder how much worse off Ruby and I would have been without the support of my mother, my sister-in-law and later, my partner. They not only helped me financially, supplementing Daniel's sporadic generosity, but they gave me support in my everyday life.

Lives unravel. You recover, but it takes time. And when you do, the sense of vulnerability remains with you; the sense of responsibility is always there. Familiar feelings return unexpectedly, irrationally.

"I have to make sure I can look after you," I told my daughter recently. She reached for my hand.

* * *

Reading Bertha's letters to Henry, they feel familiar. As she tries various tactics in asking for money, they are by turns beseeching, conciliatory, accusing, angry or painful. She calls him "dearie", "Harry", "Henry", "Lawson"; but when they are from her lawyer, the detachment kicks in: "Sir".

I look back through some emails I sent to Daniel, forgotten under a pile of cyber dust in my Sent box. Like Bertha's letters, my texts range from polite to pissed off:

I can deal with living expenses but bills like this are really hard...can you send me that money...I've already borrowed off Mum. I haven't got any money after paying for everything...I have \$70 after paying the rent until I get paid...I only have \$100 until I get paid, and out of that I have to pay for Ruby's excursion (\$25)...I'm not earning enough to make ends meet...I know you are in the Caribbean somewhere, surely there is a bank...Are you still in London, I need you...

Daniel always answered from somewhere. He was by turns flush and frugal: "Sure. I hope this helps a little... I sent you \$ to get out of a scrape...I want to help you out, but things have been tight for me too..."

It's the same tone, the same words, just a different method of communication. The anxiety. The exhaustion. The lack.

* * *

I meet with a friend who lives in a blue painted house with a landscaped pond and vegetable garden that she has DIY-renovated. It gleams with care. She lives with a boarder, but she has paid off her home and her daughter now has children of her own. She has come a long way. When her husband left, their daughter was four and this was just a rundown cottage.

"I bought him out," she says. "My mother helped. I did all this later".

We eat under a tree by her pond, a small palm tree frond flapping over the table in the afternoon wind.

"We had a private agreement for support," she continues, "as the Child Support Agency hadn't started yet. It was hard. I was living on casual earnings. I felt I was bringing her up in a slum. The wind blew through holes in the windows.

"During that time, he said he had no money. He wasn't paying anything. He came to our house and saw the holes, her broken trampoline and knew she slept in my old single bed on a lumpy mattress. And he said, 'I have no money.' I said, 'Please. Just \$20 a week.' He said yes, and then he rang me and said, 'I'm not paying for your lifestyle.' What fucking lifestyle? Bringing up a four-year-old in deep poverty?"

I remember what Bertha writes to Henry: It does not look as "If I were one of the most extravagant woman' does it"!

My friend continues: "I wasn't the one who walked out after an affair. He said, 'I'm not a monster.' He was so angry. I said, 'I'm not the one saying that. Do you think you are a monster?'

"He kept saying 'I can't afford it.' So, after seven years, I took him to court and subpoenaed his income. He said, 'I got your Christmas present'. I found out he'd been earning \$89,000 a year, and this was 30 years ago. I was white hot with anger. I said, 'You are beneath contempt. Don't step foot in my house again.' But I never stopped him seeing our daughter".

Later that day, she drops me at the train station. She is still talking: "People say, 'You should be over it.' I can forgive human nature. But to let his daughter suffer in poverty when he could have helped? That's unforgiveable. He's not an appalling man – he's a weak man".

She hugs me goodbye, a pocket rocket of resilience.

I read that 84 per cent of persistently jobless families are headed by single parents. One of my friends, a single parent, is a successful psychologist with a gold shingle on her building office. Another one has paid off her home. I think of Julia Ross, whom I once interviewed, who, like Bertha, found out she was pregnant soon after separating from her partner, and sold everything to start her own HR consultancy. She later listed it on the stock exchange and bought a \$20 million home in which to raise her son. "I only wanted to give my baby a secure education and future," she told me.

The cracks in society into which single parents fall are sometimes shallow; but for the majority, the

cracks are wide and deep.

* * *

My partner takes me out for dinner. He has increasingly paid for rent, bills, designer shoes and restaurants that are at odds with my bank balance. He gave Ruby, 15, a computer and, when the piano finally wouldn't make it up more flights of stairs, he gave her a keyboard when we move into his apartment. It is brittle as loyalties and independence clash. As with my mother's regular whispering on the phone, "Do you need money, love?" I am both grateful and resistant. I am determined to look after Ruby; she's the responsibility of me and, as my partner reminded me, of her father.

At the table, with thick white napkins spread across our laps, he asks: "Has he given you any money?"

"No," I say. Our private, if sporadic, agreement of the past – in which Dan helped whenever he signed up for a cruise – had broken down. "He says work is slow and that he hasn't got any at the moment – he's living on credit. But he's in America now. If it doesn't happen soon, I'm going to Child Support".

I remember the conversation about reciprocal agreements with the Child Support officer soon after we split; it seemed pointless at the time.

"What will that do?" he asks, blunt as a butter knife. "You'll get hardly anything".

"It will be something," I insist. "It's the principle".

"You're like Bertha," he says. "Going after him for the *principle*. She was obsessed".

"Obsessed?" I repeat. I've lost my appetite. "What is obsessive about supporting your child? Maybe she was obsessed. Obsessed with trying to find a way to stop feeling so stressed about money. She needed him to help".

"She fixated. Henry didn't have any money. His friends had to help. She was ill, wasn't she?"

"It's not about her illness," I snap. "And he was ill too. That's a separate issue to supporting your kids. Why shouldn't he support his children?"

"You misunderstand," he says. "It's not just about money. It's the emotional support too. Going to Child Support won't fix that".

I look out the window at the water view. "I can't remember how we got onto this subject".

"You're upset," he says.

* * *

Soon after this, Daniel texts in the middle of the night to say that he is unable to get to a bank because he is in port on a Sunday; but he's wired money. I can pick it up.

"Tell Ruby I love her," he adds. "I'll start paying something every month while I'm on this contract". I remember what Bertha said. *At heart, he was a good father.*

I look up locations for MoneyGram. 7-Elevens and exchange booths in shopping malls are all over the city. I've done this many times before over the preceding years. I grab my passport and line up with the tourists and travellers.

I give the cashier the reference number and my identification. She hands me a form with multiple translations of the questions. As I fill it out, she looks at the computer and at my passport, and back again.

"Do you have any other identification with your name on it?" she asks.

"You have my passport".

"The sender hasn't put your full name," she explains. "I need something that matches the name on the sender's form".

"What's he put?" I ask. I think of his nicknames for me over the years. Kez? Bloss? I doubt it.

She shows me. My middle name, which appears on my passport and licence, is missing.

"He's my ex-husband," I explain through the glass. "He's probably forgotten what my middle name is. You have my photo ID". I show her the text from Dan, with the receiver number.

The tourists behind me shift in the queue to the other cashier. An older traveller, with pulled-up socks and a backpack, strides off.

She talks to a manager in a side room, and then calls MoneyGram. She hangs up and says to me: "Sorry. They say no unless the names match".

"It will take weeks for him to do it again". I insist. "It's for my daughter's music tutor". My partner hovers, concerned and annoyed Dan hasn't discovered bank transfers like everyone else. "I'll give you the money until it comes," he placates. "It's okay".

She again ducks into the side room to the unseen manager hiding behind the partition. She comes out again. The queue looks on, irritated but interested. "We are agents. We can't release the money without the full name. It's not us".

"Well, I hope if you get divorced, you have an easier time," I snap.

She baulks behind the bullet-proof glass. I snatch up my bag and walk away.

I'm being a bitch. I know I should be rational. It's a bureaucratic security block. But I'm sick of asking. This is exhausting. Calming down, I send Dan another text.

Is this how Bertha felt?

Henry, I'm sick of asking.

23.

Letter from Henry Lawson, written to David Scott Mitchell, penned at Angus and Robertson's Sydney Book Club library, April 6, 1905:²⁰⁹

Dear Mr. Mitchell,
Have been separated for two years. I had a bad attack two months ago and went to the Receiving House. On my discharge I received a summons for £6.12 [shillings] and last Monday week was sent to Darlinghurst Gaol. On my release, I am served with the appended summons. Can you help me to meet it? I have been working. I have been drinking lately, but I never ill-treated my wife, and I kept her in a comfort. This is the fourth separation and it is a most shameful and cruel case for all parties concerned. I intend to defend the next action.
Yours truly
Henry Lawson

* * *

It's been raining. The glare gives the palm trees a neon shine and wet jacaranda blossoms smear onto the gravel. The National Art School's gates are flung open for the crowd streaming in for the opening of "Ben Quilty, Afghanistan". The queue, of those wanting to see the official war artist's works, snakes down the curling staircase inside the school's gallery, Building 27, formerly the home for women deemed criminally insane when the site was Darlinghurst Gaol.

I meet friends coming down the stairs as I bump into the queue. "We can't get in," they say, annoyed. "Let's get a drink".

It's hot in the twilight. I follow them into the stone courtyard. We take glasses and stand among the throng. Tonight has brought out the arterati. A woman with a bottom curved like a Whiteley drawing flaunts a black G-string underneath a fishnet sheath black dress. An art student with platinum Heidi plaits and a bullring piercing, introduces herself through fuchsia lips to her companions, "I'm Alyce with a y".

Artists mingle with the cultured alcoholics – well-dressed regulars at every art event that offers a bar – who hover for refills, like today's Dusk and Dawn Club.

I imagine Henry here in another life, clutching his beer like he does in his statue in the Domain, dogged by an uneasy déjà-vu as he looks around at the high, sandstone walls that once caged him sporadically between 1905 and 1909 for defaulting on his child support. *Keep step, One Hundred and Three!*

"Henry would have liked this," I think aloud. If only Henry could see it now. There is beauty instead of brutality.

My partner nods towards a rangy, moustached man. "That guy looks like Henry Lawson".

"He's got the moustache. I think he's a soldier," I agree.

We head for the Burton Street Gates, pausing at the entry to a small sandstone building that is locked and guarded by a skull, an hourglass and another strange symbol carved into the stone. There is an

²⁰⁹ Henry Lawson, Letter to David Scott Mitchell, 6 April, 1905, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 148.

accomplished menace about it.

“This used to be the mortuary,” my partner observes. “Now it is the electricity room for the Art School”.

We leave it glowing with light and death, and move into the night.

* * *

Reading the Benevolent Society’s historical records of admissions to their asylums and hospitals in the Mitchell Library, I learned another reason why Bertha was aware of their work. After the divorce laws were enacted in the 1870s, the Society’s president, Sir Arthur Renwick, advocated enforcing maintenance payments for deserted wives and children, because he saw so many destitute mothers at the Society’s charitable doors. I find a picture of him online. He has an elaborate moustache like Henry’s, and kind eyes that transcend the stiffness of the photograph.

By 1905, the divorce laws did support women to some degree, or at least the children. *Part VIII ALIMONY*, decreed an earlier, brutal form of enforcing child support:²¹⁰

1. Where the application for judicial separation is by the wife the Court may make any order for alimony it deems just.
2. Where the decree is made for judicial separation the Court may make all such orders in respect of alimony to the wife as it could make if the decree was made for dissolution of marriage.

Henry wasn’t alone in his situation. In a sketch about men in gaol for not paying support, Henry writes:

They are up for ‘maintenance’ (one for neglecting to keep his alleged wife, and the other his alleged child). One has been fined double the amount in arrears, or three months. The other has been ordered to be detained in Darlinghurst Gaol until the amount is paid. The first is sure to be out in three months, and then have worked off his fine and also the amount of the ‘arrears’; the other expects friends to pay up in a few days, but if they don’t, he might be there for twelve months and ‘arrears’ running on all the time. Then his only hope will be to get clear of the Commonwealth and female suffrage in the fortnight’s grace they’ll give him when he does get out. Both prisoner and ‘confines’ wish that women were never invented, and as they become confidential, they grow quite warm on the subject of matrimony.²¹¹

Sometime later, passing the high walls of the National Art School on my way home from work, I touch the sandstone. The stones feel cold.

* * *

Letter from Henry Lawson in Darlinghurst Gaol to his book publisher, George Robertson, dated August 27, 1908:²¹²

²¹⁰ Matrimonial Causes Act 1899, S.42–43.

²¹¹ Henry Lawson, ‘Going In,’ c. 1907, in Leonard Cronin, ed., *A Fantasy of Man: Henry Lawson Complete Works 1901-1922*. (Victoria: Redwood Editions, 2000), 285.

²¹² Henry Lawson, Letter to George Robertson, 27 August, 1908, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 166–168.

Dear Robertson,

I want you to read this letter. I did not waste a shilling of that five [pounds] but paid it where it was long due and sorely needed (a grocer in North Sydney crippled with rheumatism and his wife about to be confined). Mrs. Byers can tell you this. I thought I would be alright. I thought I would be able to finish a story and some verses I had on hand, but I was hunted too much. I was sober when brought here, and sober the day before. I gave myself up, when things seemed hopeless, to get a sleep. I am sending Mrs. Byers to see you this morning. She will tell you what she has done, and what money she has got.

I have been here three weeks and it is more than enough. I was three days under separate treatment, and then on the works, but broke down and was brought from the cell into the hospital out of my mind. If I am not released, I shall have to go back to the cells again and that will spell *finis* as far as my brain is concerned. I sent some work to Bland Holt but we have not been able to get in touch with him yet (he is travelling) unless Mrs. Byers has.

We are not allowed to write here and will not be allowed to smoke for six months (except when ordered by the doctor in the hospital). It is the waste of time that is killing me now. It is refined torture to have a brain teeming with ideas and not be able to write them down. I dare not even compose to any great extent and try to keep my mind off it; lest I forget lines and may not be able to take up the thread up again when I come out. I could not live on prison fare, and without smoke, and remain sane, and the horror of the place is on me this time, and was before I came in. I never experienced cells before. Think and imagine the effect of such confinement on a temperament like mine – and think of the associations. I can get no new material out of them - I have got all the material I want for a lifetime. I could do brilliant work now, if I had my liberty, and right on up to Christmas – I could wipe off the amount under a fortnight. There is one story, drafted in Shenstone's office, 'Their Mates' Honour' which could bring me £15 or £20. I could finish it in a few days. And there is good, strong, unfinished verse. I would be sure of a month's rest, or time from the maintenance order.

And I understand, the maintenance order will go on, or be in operation all the time I am rotting in idleness here.

...I am not writing this because I'm on the wrong side of the bars, but I've done with the drink for twelve months at the very least after I get out. I made up my mind to that three weeks ago. I kept it for two years, you know, through seas of trouble. But now to the business side...

I know you have done a great deal more than the others would but I'm not asking for anything I cannot or will not pay back. You *must* know many who would help me if they thought I would keep straight. And remember those verses of mine:

When a man's in a hole you must send round the hat,

Were he gaol-bird or gentleman once.

Read, or re-read the skeleton autobiography in the *Lone Hand*, think of what you know, or what I have hinted to you of my past life, both at home, homeless, and married, think of the struggle to keep right and the success and ruin (not through my fault) in England and afterwards, and say if I haven't suffered enough without this. (My very composition is getting the gaol atmosphere). With all my faults – and it was drink only – and I was fairly hunted to that, if ever a man was – this is but a very poor end to twenty-five years good faithful work for Australia.

...Do your best to get me out of this and into the sunlight without delay and you will never regret it.

Yours Truly,

Henry Lawson

I would agree to any conditions and keep them.

Have been letting my beard grow and it's white underneath. Gave me quite a shock.

* * *

I wait on a bench for National Art School archivist, Deborah Beck. It's quiet across the courtyard because the students are all in the sandstone buildings, converted in the 1920s from a gaol to a technical college and now

the art school. It's peaceful under a grey sky streaked with sunlight. Palm trees shade the seats and fringe the hangout café. A white-shirted security officer strolls with a walkie-talkie in his pocket.

Deborah arrives. The author of *Hope in Hell: A History of Darlinghurst Gaol and The National Art School*,²¹³ she's immersed in the characters once incarcerated here. She recites bushrangers: "Captain Thunderbolt, Captain Moonlite..."²¹⁴ And in 1882, Archibald, for failing to pay the court costs resulting from a libel action against *The Bulletin*.

By 1905, when Henry began begging his benefactors and editors for help, Archibald was mentally imprisoned by anxiety. Archibald's biographer, Sylvia Lawson (Henry's great niece), writes that by 1906 the great editor had become "spectacularly and beautifully mad. He ordered incredible quantities of wine for launching his [new publication] *The Lone Hand* and writes three-figure cheques for contributing poets".²¹⁵ Archibald was no longer in a position to help Henry. He had been committed to Callan Park Asylum, which these days, like the former Darlinghurst Gaol, is the art school campus for the University of Sydney, where patients who once lived there still sometimes wander into the buildings, unsure where they now belong.

At the National Art School, we cross the entrance courtyard to the building opposite. Like the others, it is rounded, sandstone and renovated. The art shop spills merchandise outside the side entrance.

Deborah leads down some stairs that descend into a dim, narrow passage lined with doors. She spans her arms across the passage, touching the walls with her hands. I can easily touch the ceiling without stretching.

"When I do tours, I talk about Lawson here," she says. "This is closest to what he describes the cell as – a sandstone tomb. Look at the stone roof, and the width of the walls. Single cells were eight feet by five feet and ten feet high". I calculate the metrics. Two and a half metres long; one and a half metres wide and three metres high. A lanky man like Henry could only pace a few steps.

A rusted, iron-barred gate leans against a claustrophobic enclave. "I think that's where the clothes were distributed," Deborah observes of the tiny space. A picture on the wall shows prison garb, which is surprisingly civilised, with brimmed hats and waistcoats. Almost hipster. "In his jail photos, Henry wore a suit. They dressed in almost street clothes".²¹⁶

Deborah explains that after the new prisoners – whether a poet who owed pounds to his wife, or a wife killer – were brought through the gates, they were led down here to this dark passage, under the Governor's Quarters. They were checked by the doctor and given prison clothes; they surrendered their personal belongings.

We move further down the tunnel and she opens a door, revealing stairs to what was the men's bathhouse. She points out some blue mottling on the sandstone, like bluebottles on a beach: "That's the original colour of the jail. Blue was supposed to calm, but I think personally all it did was make them feel cold".

"He wrote about the cold," I remember.

²¹³ Deborah Beck, *A History of Darlinghurst Gaol and The National Art School*. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005).

²¹⁴ Deborah Beck, Personal Interview, National Art School. (Sydney, 2015).

²¹⁵ Sylvia Lawson, *The Archibald Paradox*. (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2006 [1983]).

²¹⁶ Deborah Beck, Personal Interview, National Art School (Sydney, 2015).

“His writing is the best description of the jail,” says Deborah. “Other writing is formal descriptions from officials, but his is lyrical”.²¹⁷

We go back up the stairs the way we came in, into the morning, and then cross back to a building adjoining the café. “It’s impossible to know where he was exactly but, because it was alimony, this was the debtors’ quarter”. She turns around, beckoning to another building close by, now the National Art School Gallery. “He may have also been in there, because he describes the staircase”.

It’s where the tougher criminals were sent. I remember one of his letters: “It is real gaol this time”.

Deborah leads out of the debtors’ quarter back into the main courtyard. “Then he got solitary confinement for writing poems for other prisoners. The murderer George Love stole a pencil and paper from the printer for him. It was a terrible thing to be put in solitary for. It was dark for 23 hours a day... It was too harsh”.²¹⁸

Throughout his sporadic incarcerations, Henry pleaded against the harshness to his friends, begging for help to meet the debt and railing against Bertha. In 1906 he entreated Magistrate Francis Sheriff Isaacs for relief, protesting that he wasn’t drinking but he’d been recently put into Darlinghurst Gaol and had “got the kids fixed up for twelve months ahead” so, as a result, was “very hard up” and “the wife is thoroughly bad”.²¹⁹ Given the tone of this letter, I’m reading “bad” as bitch.

In the same bitter letter, Henry claimed Bertha was travelling “saloon passage” to Perth and claimed his trouble was because of her “secret gambling”. But the comfortable travel may have been paid for by her company as she was a sales representative and she mentioned it required trips to other part of Australia, and once to New Zealand. The gambling is a curve ball. I’ve read that she was callous, and vengeful and mad²²⁰ but the only gamble I can see in her life is marrying Henry.

I think of Henry in his sandstone tomb. For all Henry’s faults and defaults, I don’t think Bertha would have wanted him like this, desperate in the dark.

²¹⁷ *ibid.*

²¹⁸ *ibid.*

²¹⁹ Henry Lawson, Letter to Francis Sheriff Isaacs, February 1906, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 149–150.

²²⁰ Gilmore, ‘Personal History: Henry Lawson and I’. Also see Roderick, *Henry Lawson A Life*, 264.

24.

Abridged letter by Henry Lawson, Prisoner 32, from Darlinghurst Gaol to Mrs Byers, dated September 26, 1909:²²¹

Dear Mrs. Byers,

I have had a heavy cold and my head is not clear, so must write anyhow. I have written to Mr. Robertson; go see him when you get this. I think we can only write on Sunday, and I have only got two letters...

The case seems desperate but do all you possibly can. I'd soon go hopelessly out of my mind here. Do anything to raise the money and I'll take care this business will never happen again. You might even go to my mother. She has plenty. Her address is Mrs. Lawson, "Old Stone House" Tempe (near Railway Station)...Her property is near the railway gates. She'd tell you of some friends anyway. It is real gaol this time, you know, and the loneliness is terrible...

Yours in Trouble,

Henry Lawson

* * *

Deborah and I walk across the courtyard to the National Art School's library, once Darlinghurst Gaol's hospital. Upstairs, there are aisles of art books and an enclosed verandah overlooking the school.

"He was at the hospital a lot," she says. "He would have walked here for exercise. I think about what he would have seen. The view would have been the same, except for fewer trees. And they've taken the bars away that used to be over the windows".

In her book, Deborah writes about Henry befriending murderer, David Hanna, in the hospital walkways. I find reports of Hanna's trial throughout May 1903, the same year as Henry and Bertha separated. Hanna shot his wife, Mary, after he:

...shot his wife and attempted to commit suicide. Everything to save the woman's life was done...but after lingering for a few days she died...the defence, Mr. Pollock said, would be at the time he fired the shot he was suffering from insanity..."²²²

Henry recalls walking for hours in the corridor of the barred hospital with Hanna, who was "under sentence of death and had a separate table at meals. He was suffering from an old bullet wound in the head. He said he was sorry she died. He told me all about it: cackling, mischief making women neighbours and relatives invading his home – and all. I sympathised with that man – his trouble had been in some respects so like my own".²²³

We stand in the old hospital corridor, now the verandah. With the bars removed, there is a clear view of the sandstone and courtyard below, empty because the students are in classes. Henry is in our thoughts.

"What do you think of Bertha?" I ask Deborah. "She was seen as the bitch, although she had her supporters too".

²²¹ Henry Lawson, Letter to Isabel Byers, 26 September, 1909, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 175.

²²² 'Paddington Tragedy – Trial of David Hanna – Charged with Murder,' in *The Australian Star*, 20 May, 1903, 5. Accessed March 30, 2017, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/228530374>.

²²³ Quoted in Beck, *Hope in Hell*, 125.

Deborah looks resigned. "She still had to survive, and she had two children. It was harder to work then with kids. It seems harsh; but I understand it as well".

I'm conflicted too. I see Bertha's need for money, but I feel the harshness of Henry's situation. He is entwined in addiction and responsibility. I try to remain balanced when Henry comes up in conversation. My friends and family have become used to my distracted comments about a poet that has been dead for nearly a century and his single-mother wife. They have an opinion too.

In Manly, when Anna and I tracked the cliff where Henry fell (or jumped), we discussed Henry with her mother, who lived in the beachside suburb.

"Kerrie is writing a book," Anna told her mother.

"What about?" She has a theatrical voice.

"Henry Lawson," I answer, "the poet. He lived in Manly at one point".

"Oh yes," she says. "I know his work. Why him?"

I explained about modelling in the jail chapel. About Bertha, and the connection I felt to the story. They helped to explain why I was spending my Sunday wandering around a cliff face, looking for where Henry fell.

"Why did he go to jail?" she asked.

"Didn't pay his child support".

"Was he an arsehole?" "I used to think so. He was a poet and an alcoholic. So he couldn't pay. I don't think he was an arse. Not deliberately anyway".

She sighed. "He sounds hard work. All poets are".

* * *

Not long after this, I show Bertha's court affidavit to my partner. He reads it and then stops, exasperated. "How many times does she have to say he's cruel?" he says. "Three...no four...seven! But if he hit her...what a bastard".

"He denied it," I say. "He said he never hurt her". We keep shifting positions, like politicians.

I try to be a realist. Henry's assets were a portfolio of articles and books. He was a celebrity poet, but he was remunerated in critical acclaim more than money. He was an alcoholic. So how can you pay when you have nothing to pay with? This is what his supporters argued. There's a tolerance around him that fits with the acceptance of the troubled artist.

I remember that Robertson warned Bertha before their wedding that Henry was a temperamental genius. Bertha had been idealistic. But idealism fades when you have your furniture repossessed and children who need clothing and food.

I shift position again when I recall biographer and scholar Colin Roderick's view. Whether she had been warned or not, the words flung at Bertha are resentful and relentless. Roderick writes that "she spun the wheels of retribution"; she was "callous"; Henry feared she "poisoned the children's minds". He added that

Mary Gilmore said “jealousy paid a part in her remedy”.²²⁵

I’m shocked by the venom of it all, and irritated by the familiar narrative of the grasping ex-wife using the children for her own gain against the besieged husband who loses it all. *He said; she did. He did. She did, did, did, and said, said, said.* “Twisted bitch,” a friend howls after he receives yet another letter from his ex’s lawyer. “I hate her!”

Bertha knew this narrative. She told Henry in a letter, “A man gets every sympathy”.²²⁶ I think about this. Having been educated, worked in a career, and paid for childcare and been the sole earner, I understand the complexity of the situation of a hand out and a hand full. That Bertha was a 24/7 mother, as well as earning money, seems to be ignored by those who look at her as Henry’s persecutor. Perhaps she wanted Henry to feel responsibility too, if only by sending him to jail.

As Deborah and I continued walking around the school, I recognised the mortuary where I’d paused on the night of the Quilty exhibition. Since then, I’d read that the symbols on the morgue are the traditional Gothic symbols of mortality: the hourglass, the reverse flame, and the skull and crossbones that stalked the condemned prisoners in adjoining cells. Shadowed by the morgue, with the sulphur-tainted air drifting through the windows, I imagined Henry pacing with “hypnotised feet” and cursing a “mad woman’s lies”²²⁷ as the gas lamps in the exercise yard flared below.

* * *

Abridged letter from Henry Lawson to Mrs Byers, Darlinghurst Gaol, December 8, 1909.²²⁸

Dear Mrs Byers,
...Stevens thought I was in for £29... also that the order worked “automatically” (Mrs. L’s word) and I “was here whether she liked it or no”. But I’ve no patience to write more, except he didn’t know I was in, and out a fortnight, and in again. If the worst comes tell friends it’s £15 12.; £15 12s.; £15 12.s – FIFTEEN POUNDS TWELVE!!! I could shriek it out. But I’m all in the dark as to what is going on outside and perhaps I had better write no more...
Kind remembrances to all,
Yours Very Truly,
Henry Lawson

* * *

Mrs Byers rallies his friends, writing letters to actor and producer Bland Holt and calling on George Robertson on behalf of Henry. She brings his dinners, cradled on the long journey across the harbour from North Sydney to Darlinghurst Gaol. She is distressed on the other side of the bars.

Deborah and I wonder about Mrs Byers. “She was older than him, wasn’t she?” Deborah asks. “He

²²⁵ Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life*, 265.

²²⁶ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, in Lothian Publishing Company records 1895–1950, MS 6026, Box XX1A Lawson material, State Library Victoria.

²²⁷ Lawson, *One Hundred and Three*.

²²⁸ Henry Lawson, Letter to Isabel Byers, 8 December, 1909, in *Henry Lawson Letters 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 181–182.

was 38 when he was in gaol. Were they lovers?"²²⁹

"I don't think so," I say. "But I think she was in love with him".

By 1905, Henry had been living with Mrs Byers for two years at various residences around the North Shore of Sydney. If they weren't lovers, they were at the very least like mother and son. Henry complained about her menagerie of cats, but he would bring home stray dogs and kittens. Mrs Byers would forgetfully leave eggs on his bed, which he – just as vague – would accidentally sit on, spreading yolk over his pants. But Henry called her affectionately the "little woman" and, when he was in trouble, he turned to her for help.

The letters to Mrs Byers are a stream of screams and pleas. In 1909, he posts one letter to Mrs Byers: "shame *The Bulletin* into doing something". Henry was feeling abandoned. Mrs Byers' ghost rises. She told her biographer:²³⁰

I feel now that what I'm going to tell will be unbelievable. The persecution he underwent was terrible and it went on for years. The cruelty of it was bad but the ignorance of his persecutors was worse. Here was a poor, underpaid writer, expected to write poetry, stories and verse as if he was a printing machine. What were his brother-writers doing? Did they fully realise the torture such a proud and sensitive man as Henry Lawson was forced to undergo? Did any of them busy round as I had to? Or did they let their pen-mate go to jail without a thought. Certainly Lawson would always dip his hand in his pocket for a fellow writer when it was a much smaller question than that of jail. Yet none of them seemed to make a move to help him. Were they really indifferent or what was it? I do not blame them all though as a body, they seemed to lack the spirit of camaraderie and good fellowship.

I imagine her with a warmed plate on her lap, catching the ferry to the city and then walking to Darlinghurst. Her kindness was harbour-deep. In her recollections she recalls: "On one occasion that Henry was in jail the flesh was starved off his bones. It really looked like as if his bones would rattle. This is perfectly true".²³¹

Having raised the money, Mrs Byers arranged his release:

They called his 'crime' the disobeying of an order of the court, but as he was not allowed to write in jail, so how was he to earn money? He had been put on ration No.1 or in plain Australian, 'starved'...How Henry Lawson lived through it all and kept his reason I know not.²³²

Mrs Byers confided to her biographer that she was taunted by friends for her foolishness in sticking to such a "ne'er-do-well" as Lawson; they advised her that "he will never mend". But she replied to them by quoting Henry's 1909 poem:

Her Vagabond Friend:
Who knows what Dame Fortune may turn in the end,
And smile, at the last on that 'vagabond friend'.²³³

I think of Henry's sign-off to Mrs Byers: *Yours in trouble*.

²²⁹ Deborah Beck, Personal Interview, 2015.

²³⁰ 'Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers,' ed. Curtis.

²³¹ *ibid.*

²³² *ibid.*

²³³ *ibid.* See also *A Fantasy of Man: Henry Lawson Complete Works 1901-1922*, ed. Leonard Cronin. (Sydney: Lansdowne, 2000), 908.

25.

Letter from Bertha Lawson to Henry, dated January 2, 1910:²³⁴

Dear Harry,

I told Jim last night that you were going to take him out one day and the poor little fellow nearly cried with delight and we must not disappoint him.

Bertha came into my room and said, "Doesn't my daddy want to see me?" I said yes, of course he did, Bertha cried, "Take Jim out as he was sick and a day in town would do him good".

Could I leave the children with you on Sunday afternoon for an hour or two, I have a very dear friend in St Vincent's Hospital and I want to see her on Sunday. I thought if I left the children with you, I could call later for them.

Will this arrangement suit you and then one day next week, when Jim comes to town for Physical Culture he could meet you and you could have tea together and he could come here at 5.30 and be home with me. I am so glad for his sake that you will keep – it will mean a great deal to the boy.

I am sorry about your headache. I think it's your nerves that cause the trouble and this plays the mischief with nervous people.

...[hard to decipher] Let me know the Sunday arrangement will suit you. If not I'll arrange for you to see the children on Saturday afternoon.

With kind wishes

I remain Yours etc.

Bertha

* * *

My friend and I walk into the city around the Quay. He notices a curling laneway, a miracle of history in a city consumed by square metres of space. "That's Bulletin Place".

"Henry would hang out there and ask the *Bulletin* staff for money," I said.

"Poor Henry," he sighs, back in Henry's camp again.

"Poor Henry? What about his wife and kids?"

"He was an alcoholic," he reminds me. "And he was a genius. He shouldn't have neglected his responsibilities to his children, but he shouldn't have gone to jail". He owns a framed photograph of Amy Winehouse as a child mouseketeer, on which an artist has graffitied: "My gift is my burden".

Perhaps George Robertson would have had a similar thought about Henry. When the Angus and Robertson Gallery opened in 1909, Robertson installed Bertha as manager, to give Bertha the income that Henry couldn't provide and build a financial buffer between Bertha and his declining writer. Henry complained to Mrs Byers in a letter from gaol, written October 31: "Mrs Lawson is getting good money at A & Rs".²³⁵ So Bertha must have moved into the A & R fold in late 1909. It was an act of loyalty by Robertson. Everyone knew by then about Henry's declining health and productivity.

²³⁴ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, 2 January, 1910, in Lawson Family Papers 1892–1925, MLMSS 3694/Box 1/Folder 2, State Library of NSW.

²³⁵ Henry Lawson, Letter to Isabel Byers, 31 October, 1909, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1895-1922*, ed. Roderick, 177.

The gallery walls were painted red, but Henry's friends were waving white flags. Mrs Byers' anxious and constant letters had resulted in his friends sending around the hat to raise the money to send Henry to writer E.J Brady's bush camp, to recover from the jailing and to dry out.

Perhaps exhausted too by the vicious cycle of summonses, gaolings and releases, her tone had changed with the New Year. If 1909 had been characterised by hostile gaoling and pleas, she seemed to have made a New Year's resolution to try to create harmony and to emphasise the children. Or perhaps, with the money in the "fund" from Henry's friends' fundraising, she'd paid a few bills and could breathe rather than scream.

Henry writes to Mrs Byers hopefully on December 19, 1909: "They can't very well leave me here over Christmas; I shall probably be out on the last day (Christmas Eve)". He asks her to arrange Christmas presents for his children, and "we'll give them a pleasant surprise on Christmas morning".²³⁶

Bertha's letter of January 2, 1910 is conciliatory. She seems to think that Henry is out of gaol once more, as he expected. But a letter from Henry sent to Mrs Byers on January 5 is addressed from the gaol's hospital, signalling he's still behind bars, albeit in medical care. He's well enough to fume: "I authorised no-one to go to Mrs Lawson (whom I have not spoken nor written for years) nor attempt to make terms with her".

Bertram Stevens had momentarily set aside his work as a law clerk at Allen, Allen & Hemsley to step in once more, as he did when they first separated, to negotiate a truce on behalf of those who had sent round the hat and formed the "Lawson's Committee" to raise money known as "the fund". He later recalls in his memoir:

I saw Mrs. Lawson and she agreed to forego the amount due if we guaranteed that Lawson would leave Sydney and not molest her as he had done. We raised about 30 pounds and I saw Lawson and offered him three alternatives – a trip around the Pacific, a visit to a station, or a visit to E.J Brady at Mallacoota. He refused them all at first, but eventually agreed to go to Brady's place.

I might mention that as a reward for my trouble Lawson walked into my room at Allen's and without warning, struck me with his stick on the leg. I was infuriated at this and grabbed him by the collar, kicked him vigorously and ran him out.²³⁷

I imagine Henry brooding over his beer. He seems to think his friends are conspiring with Bertha. In February 1910, he complains to another supporter, long-time friend and academic, John Le Gay Brereton, who was secretary of the Lawson's Committee:²³⁸

I understood it was to be a gathering of friends brought about by Fred Brown, at the instigation of Mrs. Byers to help me out of trouble. I also understood that some of my friends wished me to go away to the country for a while; that I gladly agreed to. I authorised no one to go to Mrs. Lawson on my behalf, nor attempt to make terms with her. This was an age ago. You may not be aware that Bertram Stevens and another had been, on his own admission, in communication with the comptroller and Minister for Justice all along. I was shown it in black and white before my release. That little lady – Mrs. Byers' name was put about shamefully.

You may either do (1) pay the money into North Sydney Police Court on the order; (2) pay such as friendly subscribers are willing for benefit of my son 'Jim'; (3) return to subscribers or (4) -_____ Yours Sincerely, Henry Lawson.

²³⁶ Henry Lawson, Letter to Isabel Byers, 19 December, 1909, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1895-1922*, ed. Roderick, 181–182.

²³⁷ Stevens, *Henry Lawson*.

²³⁸ Henry Lawson, Letter to John Le Gay Brereton, 5 February, 1910, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1895-1922*, ed. Roderick, 189.

I'm unsure what "or (4) - _____" is, but I interpret that Le Gay Brereton found the dash and underlining to be self-explanatory.

Mrs Byers' ghost rises again to defend her friend. She's strong in her Scottish way, but she's exhausted too. She wants this to end. She wants him home writing. She wants to see him worried only about a starving stray he picked up on the suburban street. When he was released once more, she recalls how shocked she was at the state of him:

When Lawson got out of jail his bones almost rattled. This is no exaggeration. He was a skeleton. I am not one who is inclined ordinarily to show great emotion but this time I cried when I saw him. Yet there are people who take such a thing callously, and that a starving poet is nothing. Yet this was done in a grand young country like Australia....

Yes, this was done to Henry Lawson, the most childlike and kindest heart that ever breathed. I have seen Henry Lawson bring a starved kitten or a dog in and feed it many a time. But no one seems prepared to raise a hand on his behalf. If the men of today were prepared to stop such ill treatment as this, we would say they have something to fight for. The men of today will have to answer coming generations for this treatment. As Lawson says, 'I will strike back from the grave.'²³⁹

²³⁹ 'Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers,' ed. Curtis.

26.

Handwritten letter from Bertha to Henry, written from Angus and Robertson Gallery, January 29, 1910:²⁴⁰

Dear Harry,

I am afraid you are labouring under a misunderstanding in regard to your friends. I can speak to you now because you are yourself, and I sincerely congratulate you and hope that you will continue and win back your health and self-respect. Before Xmas as you know things were very black with me, and I almost lost my Position. You see no business firm will stand the private worries of an employee interfering with the Business of the day. And when you came into the gallery in the state you were in I could not do my work and the Firm strongly objected to it. How you consider [?] that you were badly treated by me on account of the extreme steps I was forced to take with you.

But don't forget your children, and I had to take steps to protect them, if I lost my position don't you see the children could have had to go hungry at Xmas time?

Re the fund. The position is this. The money that was paid into Court I handed back to your friends to use on your behalf, especially to give you [?] a holiday away, believing that it would keep you to be yourself again. So that I consider you foolish not to take advantage of what your real friends are trying to do help you.

Now I have some bad news for you. But you must not let it upset you. We've got to do what is wise in the matter. I have had a very great battle to try and save Jim's life. As you know Jim has been very delicate ever since he had pneumonia in Manly about six years ago. It left the child with a cavity in the lung, and it only has been ceaseless care that has kept the boy alive...

He ordered him to be placed under a scientific physical culture expert and Jim is now in his hands. I have to pay four pounds .4 quarterly fees for this alone. Jim's expenses come to 1 pound weekly, about 19 /7. The child has to drink a quart of milk daily and have plenty of eggs etc, cod liver oil and other nourishment. Already there is a great improvement in the Boy and I sincerely hope it will mean renewing strength for him.

If you will help me to save Jim it will be a great comfort to you as well as to me. The child is already asking for you and begging me to take him to you. Will you see him. There is no need for you to see me at all. If you will write and say when you will see him I could make arrangements. Why not take him out one day and leave him at the door of the shop. He could come to me in the afternoon and go home with me. You could take him to Dinner in town he'd just be delighted with it.

If I did not think you were going to keep yourself I would not ask you to do this. As the sorrow of you falling back would only [add?] more misery to the little fellow. The child dearly loves you and gave a boy a thrashing at school because the boy spoke slightly of you to Jim. I never knew anything of this until a few days ago. It seems so cruel that you should not see the child now that you are yourself.

Bertha is a lovely, bright and healthy girl and will never have to face what Jim has had to do.

Re yourself. No one is more pleased to see you yourself again than I am. Not from any personal feelings at all. Because we both realise our Position and both knew that the only bond existing between us is the children.

As far as I'm concerned, you are free as if we had never met – but that does not make me any less pleased to see you regain your manhood.

Harry do not allow a lot of foolish [?] to upset your splendid fight to regain your self-respect – Don't let an idea that you are being shoved out of Sydney or that you are being influenced by your friends or indirectly by me. If so you are quite wrong...

If I were your sister I should beg of you for your own sake to leave Sydney for a little while to recover your health and strength and when you return settle down to some real good work.

²⁴⁰ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Henry Lawson, 29 January, 1910, in Lawson Family Papers 1892–1925, MLMSS 3694/Box 1/Folder 2, State Library of NSW.

Re the Court. If you will pay into Court whatever you can afford to help with Jim that will do. Pay it into the North Sydney Court direct that saves me a lot of trouble and I will see that they do not worry you over the arrears. When you send the money, drop me a line and let me know and I will call for it – and that will save them nagging at you. There is a decent man there and if you see him and tell him you are going to do your best to arrange matters.

I want you to help with the boy because I can never get a day beyond the dreary drudgery and the incessant worry of making ends meet and keeping out of debt. I have to pay the housekeeper 10 / weekly and have to pay a heavy rent because we must live on the heights and I have to have a balcony for Jim to sleep on. He has to sleep out winter or summer. So you can see life has not been an easy one for some years past, and if you will come forward and help it will make the burden lighter. I've had to work for eight years incessantly without ever having a holiday sometimes until eleven o'clock at night. I worked for three months from 8 o'clock until ten every night when the firm I represented was going under. So if you help me at the end of this year I may be able to take the children and I for a holiday.

I ask you again not to treat your real friends unkindly and above all do not let other people influence and interfere but your friends who really have your welfare at heart. When will you see Jim?

I remain yours etc,

Bertha Lawson.

PS I want you to understand that there is no personal reason for the writing in this? ...as far as any personal feeling is concerned I might as well be dead. So don't be afraid that I am trying to influence you on my own behalf B.L

27.

We drive to Norman Lindsay's former home and studio at Springwood in the Blue Mountains, taking the scenic route past cranes swinging across newly released land. There are rows of faded fibro cottages and polo fields.

Burnt trees from last year's bushfire fringe the Lindsay National Trust property. His second wife, Rose, is everywhere – as a sculpture, in the art works lining the walls, in photos and in the books in the gallery shop. The pool grove, where Elle Macpherson, Portia de Rossi and Kate Fischer frolicked in *Sirens*, is deep and grassed.

By 1909 Lindsay had left his first wife, Katherine, known as Katie, who according to their son Jack's memoir *Life Rarely Tells*, retreated to Brisbane where her sister lived. Jack Lindsay remembers his mother as a woman with a small bright parasol, unafraid of a herd of sullen cattle that lingered near fragile fences in the heat. But her encouraging smile during those early bewildered days in Brisbane changed and faded. He recalls the smell of gin around her friends, and his father's drawings being given away, and the anxiety and resentment he feels as the eldest male in a fatherless house as his mother "retreated behind a dim pane of unconcern".²⁴¹

A fatherless child. A retreating mother. It sounds awfully familiar.

In a 1919 copy of the *Melbourne Age*, wedged between an article about policemen's pay and another enticingly headlined "Husband Orders Wife's Arrest – Sequel in Court" there is a column with the sober title, "An Artist Divorced:"

Sydney: In the Divorce court, Friday, granted a decree nisi in the suit in which Kathleen Parkinson petitioned for a dissolution of marriage with Norman Lindsay, the well-known artist. Further evidence revealed he was living with Rose Soadey at Springwood.²⁴²

In a 1928 sketch *Self-Portrait with Model*, Norman is seated on an armchair concentrating on his sketchpad while a nude lounges sensuously on the chair's arm. I'm not sure if this is his model-wife, Rose. An image search of his works is a blur of his characteristic output – all breasts and curls. The model in the sketch shares Rose's strong jaw.

Norman writes in his memoir *My Mask* that Katie, with a woman's intuition, had taken exception to Rose when she started modelling for him, despite him regularly using artist's models in his studio.

After Katie retreated, Norman and Rose lived together, first in Sydney, then London.

In 1912, they moved into this Springwood home, where siren sculptures rise from the lawns. Rose and Norman knew Henry through the *Bulletin* and Rose seemed to have had a soft spot for him. Rose recalls Henry hanging around the turnstiles at Circular Quay with a crony, waiting for her ferry to arrive when Norman and she lived across the harbour. It's likely that Norman – who was friends with Banjo Paterson, with whom he would go horse-riding in Centennial Park, and who disliked drunks, despite his own bohemian lifestyle – tolerated Henry only because he was a *Bulletin* colleague.

²⁴¹ Jack Lindsay, *Life Rarely Tells*. (Melbourne: Penguin, 1982), 46.

²⁴² 'An Artist Divorced – Norman Lindsay as Respondent,' in *The Age*, 21 June, 1919, 14. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/155203134>.

Everyone has their own story, their own personality readings. In another of Norman's memoirs, *Bohemians at the Bulletin*, he includes Henry among his profiles and, surprisingly, includes Bertha. He knew Bertha through the Angus and Robertson Gallery where he exhibited, and it was there that Lindsay encountered the hostilities between Mr and Mrs L:

Lawson's moods were unpredictable. Lawson idolatry of today will deplore the irreverence of attaching such a label as nuisance to him, but I can assure the idolaters that they too would have dived for cover to escape Henry when he was drunk...Henry must have been an impossible man to live with. I knew Mrs. Lawson well, and liked her.²⁴³

What? *Liked* her? So far, the only person who I'd found admitting friendship with Bertha was Rose Scott, who publicly defended Bertha in a letter to the newspaper in later years, and then, much later in life, Ruth Park. Norman goes on:

George Robertson had put her in charge of a picture gallery which he institutioned next door to Angus & Robertson's bookshop, and as I had works on exhibition there, I often dropped in for a chat with her. She must have been a beautiful girl, and was a still a handsome woman in maturity, and from what I observed of her personality, I am sure that whatever went wrong with the Lawson marriage was not of her begetting.

Reading of Lindsay's admiration for Bertha, I can't help wondering: was this loyalty more a flirtation with Mrs Lawson? Or was it simply a dislike of drunks, which is a recurring theme throughout his writings about bohemia? But there seems to be nothing intended by Lindsay except a mutual respect – and perhaps disrespect for Lawson as alcoholic. I read on:

I can only relate what I observed of it myself. I was holding a one man show in the gallery and happened to be in Mrs. Lawson's small office, finishing a pen sketch which had been commissioned, when she dashed in exclaiming breathlessly, 'I can't go out there. He's only come in to annoy me'. I glanced out, to discover that 'he' was Henry Lawson, who was going around making a pretence of looking at the pictures, in which, I am sure, he had no interest in whatever, for he kept half an eye on Mrs. Lawson's door, from which she refused to emerge till he had gone. But her emotional agitation, and the intonation of that exclamation of hers, left no doubt in my mind that Henry's intrusion to the gallery was malicious.²⁴⁴

Re-reading the letter Bertha sent to Henry on January 29, 1910 and recognising her line, "now that you are yourself" as Bertha's customary code for him being sober, I wonder if her anxiety about being fired relates to what Lindsay witnessed as Henry being "malicious" and hanging about while she hid, ignoring potential buyers of works, or if it refers to another time. Her fear about losing her job is constant. It's a fear I recognise.

She's trying to defuse the tension created by Henry's resistance to leaving Sydney. She emphasises the children, reminding him of their joint responsibility. She talks of "we" at times; but she is still the mother, asserting "I" in her efforts with Jim's health and her anxiety about money. It shows the stress she'd been under, behind her demands for money, and perhaps this is what had driven her decision to request Henry's arrest. But

²⁴³ Lindsay, *Bohemians at the Bulletin*, 58–59.

²⁴⁴ *ibid.*

now, realising that Henry's health and ability to work was being compromised, she instead entreats him to pay "whatever you can afford to help with Jim" and puts attempts to keep him sober back in the hands of his friends.

Bertha is now speaking to Henry as a mother, rather than as a hostile ex-wife. She's sensing a window while Henry's sober: "We both realise our position and both know that the only bond existing between us is the children".

I remember, when Ruby was born, she hunted for my breast while her father watched beside me on the hospital bed. From that moment on, Dan and I were bonded together, even when we made our lives apart.

28.

Letter dated February 1910 sent by Henry Lawson, to Bertha Lawson:²⁴⁵

To Mrs. Henry Lawson,
I am willing to pay so much a week into court (starting from next week) until arrears are cleared up. I would be glad to hear early what terms you suggest, trusting that you will suggest something in reason as I am pretty hard up. I would like you to know that I have never asked Stevens, Ryan or anyone else to go to make terms. I have not touched a penny of the fund, nor do I intend doing so.
Yours Sincerely,
Henry Lawson.

Back at the former Gaol, Deborah Beck and I go outside and through the National Art School's looming green gates. She points across the street at another sandstone building, next to the medical suites and apartments that carry the sign which explains Henry was a patient there and reproduces his poem, *After All*.

"That was the Reception House. It was also called the Mental Hospital. He spent more time there" – she nods across the street – "than here at the gaol. They had a room set aside for him. They called it, "The Lawson Room". Sister McCallum took him under her wing. And Mrs Byers, of course. He was looked after by women; a lot of people cared for him. He was a difficult man. They'd give him money to get out of jail, support him, pay his rent..."²⁴⁶

"I think Bertha was frustrated too," I suggest.

"I think anyone who keeps destroying their life is frustrating," she replies. "Everyone knows people like that".

* * *

In a sprawling, crammed second-hand bookstore in Newtown I talk to the owner, who sits behind a high bench framed by floor-to-ceiling bookcases. There is dust and history all around us. It's a disused warehouse ripe for redevelopment but remaining defiant, its former sign ghosting on the street front wall like the old ones in the city.

I'm looking for a biography that so far has eluded me. I've read bits of it in libraries, but I refer to it so often that I want my own copy. I don't find it, but instead I see a biography of Mary Gilmore jammed into the Australiana section.

"What are you researching?" the owner asks from her perch.

I tell her.

"I think my great-grandfather knew Henry Lawson," she volunteers. "He was a journalist. I think they drank together".

²⁴⁵ Henry Lawson, Letter to Bertha Lawson, n.d. [February 1910], in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Colin Roderick, 190.

²⁴⁶ Deborah Beck, Personal Interview, 2015.

The drinking sessions with her great-grandfather must have been either after or before Henry reluctantly went off to Mallacoota with Tom Mutch and E.J Brady to recover from the gaol ordeal and, hopefully, ignite sobriety. But he was bitter about his treatment by the courts, telling Mrs Byers “they would crucify Christ if he came back”.²⁴⁷ Maintaining the truce, however, Bertha urged him to stay around sober friends; she supported the beer drought in the bush.

Henry writes to his son, Jim, from his rural rest:²⁴⁸

I only got your letter yesterday and it was written nearly a month ago. We are away out of the world here, and this letter will take a week or more to reach you. I’ve just come back from a 4 days tramp up the coast and over the sandhills past Cape Howe and the cairn (a pile of stones) on the border between New South Wales and Victoria. The country is wild and rough and there is no-one there...

He postscrips the letter “I’ll sell some work in Sydney, tell your mother”.

With George Robertson’s support via the gallery in providing for their children, Bertha seems more secure; she seems hopeful that Henry will remain “yourself”. Her letters have a cautious friendliness; she shows continuing concern for Jim’s chronic lung health and shares Barta’s poetry with him, overriding any antagonism between them.

In the second decade of their separation, the frustration, the hostility, the jailing, the screaming, the pleading and the letters of demand are gradually being replaced by civilised discussion of the children. Then, as the children grow older, their own voices replace their mother’s, who becomes background noise except for the occasional note asking politely for money and mentioning the children’s successes.

The children begin to write letters to their dad: first sweet, loving and childish anecdotes about school, requests for books and presents sent for his birthdays. When she is twelve, Barta sends Henry her first poem, and then writes thanking him for money to spend on learning painting with an artist, and that they have a little canary. She adds, “We are all very well but Mother is tired”.²⁴⁹ Barta chatters about her homework and needing books. Jim writes to his father too.

Henry is responsive, and warm in his letters back to his children. There’s love there. In *My Henry Lawson*, Bertha recalls: “Harry did come to see us. At heart he was a good husband and father, except when the temptation to drink was too strong”.²⁵⁰

But as the children become teenagers, the letters from them to Henry are more formal and brisk. Just as he predicted and feared, they become distant, emotionally as well as physically; they retreat with embarrassment from their dad when he returns to Sydney and begins drinking again. Barta writes:²⁵¹

We must have seen him in the hospital in Darlinghurst because I recall being there, and Jim going off with Sister MacCallum for a holiday at Yass, and coming back with a broken arm. And I remember one long, sunny quiet day Jim and I spent with him at Walker hospital. Dad showed us all over the place, and we sat in the grounds and wandered about by the water, and in the later afternoon he saw us to the tram.

²⁴⁷ ‘Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers,’ ed. Curtis.

²⁴⁸ Henry Lawson, Letter to Jim Lawson, 22 March, 1910, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 192–193.

²⁴⁹ Bertha Lawson [Jago], Letter to Henry Lawson, (n.d.) 1912, Lawson Family Papers 1892–1925, MLMSS 3694/Box 1/Folder 2, State Library of NSW.

²⁵⁰ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*, 81.

²⁵¹ Lawson [Jago], Unpublished Notes.

As time went on, I saw less and less of him. But Jim would always find him. He tried hard to attend to my needs and he was proud of me for graduating. But always his comrade was Jim.

I remember when I had started in the library, meeting him one night in Grandma's shop and he began to ask me about my life now I had set out to work. Deeply conditioned as I always was in what to say and how to act towards him, I turned the subject lightly off with something that could draw both our attention in the shop at the moment and did not go back to it. Dad said nothing. But when I went to work I found a note from him. Such a quiet note, and oh! So deeply hurt. He said, of course he loved me, and of course he knew what his children were doing, 'but never have the slightest fear that I would come to you or give you the faintest cause for embarrassment or worry'. He never would. He never did. In all the times I saw him I had nothing from him but gentleness and love.

* * *

"Do you have children?" asks the taxi driver.

"A daughter," I say.

"Does she look like you?"

"That's what people say," I reply.

"It means your husband loved you too much," he declares. "It is a saying in my country, whoever the child looks like loved the most. I have four children".

"Do they look like you?" I ask.

"Two like me, two like her," he replies. "So we both love. But no more".

"No more children?" I ask, confused.

"No more wife," he replies. He is animated at the wheel now. He gestures and sighs.

"We marry for 38 years then enough. The way she talked to me, disgusting. So we divorce. We try again, I ask her to come back, but only if she talks to me with respect. We remarry. I say, talk to me, like I talk to you". He speeds into a tunnel. "But it doesn't last. We only stay together again a year and a half. Her mind is like a stone!"

"But now," He clutches the wheel. "I see things she likes – food – and I buy it to give to her. Then I think, why should I? Why do I? But I still do. I want to hate her, but I can't. I want to find another woman, but I still prefer her. I ask our son to ask her if she wants to come back. But he said, no she doesn't and you are better living apart – you fight".

"So you love her, but you can't live together?" I venture.

"Yes. Maybe if I find another woman, I can forget about her".

The taxi pulls up at the kerb. He brakes the car, still talking about his ex. I pay the fare and he drives back into his life.

29.

Abridged handwritten letter from New Zealand politician Edward Tregear, visiting Melbourne, to Bertha Lawson in Sydney. Dated May 30, 1911.²⁵²

My dear Bertha

I haven't yet received any note from you, so I send this to let you know that my sweet self has not yet dissolved in the sleet and wet of shivering Melbourne. I had a good night's rest in a very comfortable 'sleeper' but next morning Heavens! It was cold. The Prime Minister of the Commonwealth happened to be at the station. There was also a deputation from the Trade Council, a poor drenched deputation. I know I shouldn't like Melbourne – great wide wet streets and huge cold palaces and such awful prices. 3/6 for each meal and 3/6 for each bed, – all the big hotels and I must stop at one because of my swell callers, the State Prime Minister, the president of the Arbitration Court, (Judge Higgins), the postmaster General etc. I wish they would leave me to the poor ones.

...I am to speak to 2000 people in the theatre next Sunday & I feel nervous already. But the [?], the sooner I will be back to beautiful, joyous, loving-hearted Sydney. And the sweetest of all them are at 140 – N. Syd. Please give my Bertha girlie a dozen kisses from me and give Jim a good hearty pat also – I think of those dear kiddies very much. And I don't leave their kind, affectionate little mother out either, brave little woman, tender hearted little woman. Pray for the soul of a hard rider.

Yours very faithfully,
Edward Tregear

* * *

Bertha never returned to court requesting a Decree Absolute, which would have allowed her to remarry. Henry, in a letter written soon after their judicial separation, told a friend in Hobart that he might be slipping down there with a lover, explaining she was married and “the wife won't divorce me”.²⁵³ Although he and Bertha were divorced in all but name, Bertha clung to the “Mrs” title and the judicial separation, that strange Victorian-era moral borderland between being divorced and married.

In the archives, there are some curiously tender letters to Bertha dated 1911 to 1912 from Edward Tregear, the New Zealand politician who had first helped the Lawsons secure the teaching position in Kaikoura when they went to New Zealand. I'm not sure whether there was any romance when he visited Australia where, according to his letters, he spent the day in Manly with Bertha and the children. Their relationship may have been simply platonic love. Perhaps, like Henry with Mrs Byers, Bertha too wanted someone to look after her. His letters are both intimate and reassuring.

I read about Tregear, another man with a moustache. He's a “soldier, surveyor, linguist, Polynesian scholar, writer, public servant, political reformer”. He “painted landscapes (badly)”.²⁵⁴ He had a poetic mindset, which I see reflected in his letters. He married his wife, Bessie, after she divorced her first husband in 1880. So I can see too his empathy for Bertha's separation from Henry.

²⁵² Edward Tregear, Letter to Bertha Lawson, 30 May, 1911, Lawson Family Papers 1896–1968, MLMSS 7692 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

²⁵³ Henry Lawson, Letter, c.1903 in Roderick (ed) *Henry Lawson Letters 1890-1922*, 140.

²⁵⁴ K. R. Howe, 'Story: Tregear, Edward Robert.' *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, 1993. Reproduced in *Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 30 October, 2012.

I search Wellington's Alexander Turnbull Library online. It holds archives relating to Tregear, but there's no mention of Bertha Lawson in the indexes. However, she must have confided to him in her letters because Tregear mentions her stress in another letter, written on September 15, 1911 from Wellington, New Zealand, in which he calls Bertha a "plucky little soul".²⁵⁵ He writes:

I am very sorry that I find (in your last) signs both of you being lonely and physically very tired. I do not know what to say except, 'Cheer Up' – and that is easy to say, and hard to do.

The following year he declares to Bertha that "I love you dearly"²⁵⁶ and calls her "Madame Brown eyes". He's been to her home, because he says, "I kiss your hands adieu and I shall have to withdraw my presence from the room with the creaky sofa". And, "I wish I was at Milsons Point tonight".²⁵⁷ He writes to Barta too, telling her to give Jim a friendly punch and "love to the brave tired little mother".

Reading Edward Tregear's letters, bunched in Bertha's file at the State Library of NSW, I'm reminded of my first relationship after Dan and I split up – with a French travel writer, who sent romantic emails to my Inbox every week. Because of the distance, regular dates were impossible. I'm not convinced that there was a relationship between Bertha and Edward, beyond a flirty friendship – perhaps, like me, she was juggling work and parenting, and corresponding with a distant lover was all she was capable of at the time.

* * *

"Why don't you have another child?" a friend asks me over drinks. "You're still young".

"I can't go through it alone again," I say.

A friend, who split with her partner when her son was a toddler, later re-partnered when her son was 18 and had two babies within three years. Another friend, also a single parent, did the same when her first child was ten. People move on with their lives all the time and form new families.

Around 39, I had a short-lived, irrational desire to have another baby too. After nine years, I was finally ready. But my partner wasn't.

"No," my partner said, panicked. "You have a child already. I have two. You never wanted more kids. Where has this come from?" Ever the pragmatist, he also pointed out, as my doctor did when I discussed it with her, that my reproductive health was fragile.

So, as it turned out, was the relationship.

I was lucky to have one child and, as she grows up, I feel that luck every day.

* * *

²⁵⁵ Edward Tregear, Letter to Bertha Lawson, 15 September, 1911, Lawson Family Papers 1896–1968, MLMSS 7692 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

²⁵⁶ Edward Tregear, Letter to Bertha Lawson, c. 1912, Lawson Family Papers 1896–1968, MLMSS 7692 1 (1), State Library of NSW.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

We still seem to seek the pure relationship; the romance of first, second – third? – soul mates. The person who really is our destiny rather than our divorce. A relationship counsellor I interviewed for a story told me that we all live too long now for a life partner.

“We are serial monogamists,” she suggested. “We used to marry as teenagers – he’d go to war or die from a disease, and she’d die in childbirth or soon after from disease too. We weren’t meant to spend decades with the one person. People change too much”.

When my partner, still in the fury of his own divorce, rashly proposed to me in the midst of our arguments over living together, I rashly said “yes”. But within months, and having moved into his apartment, we’d stopped talking about a date. His divorce dragged on. When I walked past wedding shops, I felt nervous rather than excited. A diamond on my finger reminded me of the commitment.

Swimming at Icebergs, a surf pool at Bondi with an historic club and an ocean-front terrace, I look up and saw a bride with a tattoo spread across her shoulders posing against the ocean. I submerge and swim on.

“I just want the ring,” I used to quip. But perhaps I should have clung to the romance, and remarried. Sealed the deal, instead of broken the engagement.

Around this time, I read the theory of British sociologist, Catherine Hakim, that women have finite erotic capital, which they should exploit. She defined erotic capital as a “combination of beauty, social skills, good dress sense, physical fitness, liveliness, sex appeal and sexual competence”.²⁵⁸

I wonder how my erotic capital is holding up after one marriage, one child and ten years of single parenting conflicting with a relationship.

“Don’t waste the pretty,” my friend jokingly scolds.

Commuting home one afternoon on the train, I watch an elderly man reach out to catch his wife, who was shuffling on a cane and had almost fallen down the carriage stairs. Shaking, she gains the security of her seat. He sits beside her, patting her knees while her tears roll along to the next station.

Erotic capital is only skin deep.

* * *

Daniel emails me from the States, which in recent months has become his new base: “I’m getting married. I need you to send the divorce papers. I’m not getting any younger and I’m in love. We are divorced, aren’t we?”

Closure was supposed to be our divorce court date, but apparently not. It takes intangible forms. I realise that he’s probably never seen the certificate, issued five years previously. He was out of the country for the court day, and I forwarded his certificate copy to his sister. He’s never mentioned it until now.

I reply to him:

Subject: divorce

Hi, I have the Divorce certificate and marriage certificate (in case you need that too).

²⁵⁸ Quoted in Bim Adewunmi, ‘Do You Buy into Catherine Hakim’s ‘Erotic Capital’?’, in *The Guardian*, 25 August, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/thewomens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2011/aug/25/catherine-hakim-erotic-capital>.

We divorced on 26 Feb 2006.

It feels final now...before it was there of course, legally, but we never really talked about it properly. You signed the form like you didn't mind either way, the court was surreal, quick and you weren't there...it was so surreal, I went to yoga afterwards like it was just another day. I didn't cry or anything. So this is the first time it feels really like we are divorced, if that makes sense, since we agreed to separate. Yesterday was the first time I cried about the actual divorce. Not that I'm upset you are getting married, as I'm happy for you, but the finality of it – delayed reaction, I guess. Weird but good for both of us.

It strikes me that the closest we've ever come to discussing our divorce is so he can marry again. The irony makes me smile.

* * *

I discover that much later in life, when her “erotic capital” was supposed to be on the wane, Bertha re-partnered discreetly. I find a letter from Alice, Bertha's younger sister, to Barta about another breakdown by Bertha, although it's unclear if it was a serious partnership. Barta writes that in this relationship, begun after she and Jim were adults, her mother found “her haven” with Will Lawson: “They were comrades and cronies. He was good company for her, as they grew old together”.²⁶⁰ According to Barta, Will was a “tough bohemian” – another writer, he shared the same surname as Henry but was no relation.

Ironically, Will was also an alcoholic when they first met; he says that Bertha saved him from the grog. I'm frustrated with her, but I understand too. After what she went through with Henry, as an older and wiser woman, she goes for Henry mark II. Do we seek old patterns that we know? Do we try to forge new relationships, but only revert to what we know? Was she trying to save him, because she couldn't save Henry?

Ruth Park met Bertha and Will when a “quaint couple” came to her kitchen door to introduce themselves after publication of her celebrated novel, *The Harp in the South* in 1948. She describes Will as having been “carved from hard grained wood with a face from the British Isles' past centuries”.²⁶¹ And Bertha, Ruth recalls introduced herself as “I'm not Mrs Will Lawson, you know,' said the little lady [Bertha]. I'm Mrs. Henry Lawson”.²⁶²

Ruth reflects it was “curious the way she found Will Lawson and took him in” and that “in Will Lawson Bertha had achieved her simple but usually unattainable aim – she had succoured and reformed an alcoholic”. She says that Bertha had literally found Will in a gutter 15 years previously; Will told Ruth that at that time he was “bust as a paper bag” and “sick as a dog”.²⁶³

He had come to the end of his buccaneering life, his health was ruined and he had no hope,” Ruth writes. “Bertha gave him a home, fed him properly and kept him sober. On a closed in back verandah of Bertha's Northbridge home, he had a Spartan bed, a dinosaur typewriter, files lining the walls. There he happily wrote his ballads and books about the old whaling days in which he had a special interest. He was a man completed.

²⁶⁰ Lawson [Jago], Unpublished Notes.

²⁶¹ Park, *Fishing in the Styx*, 190.

²⁶² *Ibid*, 190.

²⁶³ *Ibid*.

Their contentment with their mutually supportive life was pleasant to see. A memory that always makes me smile is this. One morning I called unexpectedly, and found Bertha sitting on the veranda and Will absorbedly curling her hair with a wooden clothes peg.²⁶⁴

Her relationships with Henry and Will form a triangle in Bertha's life that she hints at when she acknowledges Will as co-writing her memoir, *My Henry Lawson*: "I have told it to Will Lawson to set it down. I asked him to do this because he was a member of the old ballad writers' band and knew Harry and many of his mates and also because Harry's stories of the courage and steadfastness of the people of the bush encouraged Will".²⁶⁵

Her daughter, Barta, says she didn't mind the memoir, despite its "artless writing"; however, Will's construction of Bertha as a "rapt and dewy country girl"²⁶⁶ belied her mother's confidence and strength that survived her marriage to Henry.

I think we are attracted to what we know.

²⁶⁴ *ibid.*

²⁶⁵ Lawson, *My Henry Lawson*.

²⁶⁶ Lawson [Jago], Unpublished Notes.

30.

Extract from an extended letter from Henry Lawson, living at Leeton, NSW, to George Robertson, dated “January sometime, damn the date”, 1917:²⁶⁷

Dear Old George,

Your letter came as quite a refresher and at the right time. Not that I was feeling lonely or moody, because I’ve got a rush of working humour like a mountain creek that has been choked up for months and broken loose – the first time I’ve felt in working order for months. Besides, I’m getting my health back, feeling like my ole self – and calm. For Mrs. B. has been in Sydney for nearly three weeks on holiday and I’ve had a rest. I needed it sorely. By a cruel irony of fate I’ve been having a similar time with Mrs. B to that which I had with Mrs. Lawson the last year or so of our conjugal life. And by a stranger irony of fate, Mrs. Lawson is writing very gentle, kindly and grateful letters. It seems strange that three of the four women I was closely connected with should develop into the Brute, so to speak. I may be meself – or because I am, and was always soft and yielding or good natured and generous. Added to the Mater’s natural bent as a selfish, indolent, mad tempered woman, she was insanely jealous on account of my “literary success”. Mrs. L. of course was an insane Prussianised German, by birth on both sides, by breeding and by nature. Mrs. B seems to have been developing into a combination of the two; and the horror of it was there was no getting away from her there unless I went to Narrandera (an ungodly town just outside the area) and got drunk.

...Mrs. B’s pet insanity is dogs, cats and fowls. I don’t mind the fowls. But I’ve known her to have a clutch of chickens come out, her favourite cat eat them one after another, and then she set another hen – the tragedy to be repeated. The dog she brought up here is a fowl killer, and a man killer – a horse and sulky chaser, and all together, a dangerous dog. At least he was, but he isn’t now. I lost him with the aid of two mates and a two gallon jar of beer from Narrandera. She’ll go raving round about it, just like Mrs. L. or worse, when she comes back. You don’t know what disadvantages we Australian writers labour under.

...I also lost one of Mrs. B.’s four cats...I don’t know what’s come over the poor little lady, but she seems to be developing into a regular Harpy with the tongue of a hell-hag out of Hell, and always raving about food for the animals and after money she knows I haven’t got. I’ve written her a red-hot letter telling her I’m full up of the third instalment of my *Woman-Hell-Made-Life*...

H.L

* * *

I think about the “instalments” of women in Henry’s “*Woman-Hell-Made-Life*”. The first instalment was his selfish, jealous, indolent, mad-tempered “mater” – Louisa. In 1920, three years after Henry wrote this letter, Louisa passed away in Gladesville’s Hospital for the Insane, Sydney. This instalment concluded with a forgettable funeral at Rookwood Cemetery that belied her achievements as a suffragette and publisher.

Mrs L, the “insane Prussianised German” was the second instalment; by now she was in the background somewhere, getting on with her life and, to his surprise, writing him “very gentle, kindly and grateful letters”. Barta says that her mother moved into a child welfare career, which is interesting, given it would have put her in contact with single parents. She was certainly interested in Henry’s welfare; Mrs Byers

²⁶⁷ Henry Lawson, Letter to George Robertson, January 1917, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 261–263.

recounts meeting Bertha during a visit to one of Henry's hospitalisations, which were becoming more frequent.

In another long and meandering letter to Robertson, discussing his autobiographical poem, *Black Bonnets*, Henry reflects on Bertha lacking her mother's sense of humour:²⁶⁸

...Strange to say, (or is it strange?) my son Jim – 6 foot 2 and twenty – has, or had, the same affection for and faith in his grandmother I had for mine. I must tell you about Mudder-in-law some other time. She's got a sense of humour anyhow – can laugh even at herself as a socialist and woman league-er. Had Mrs L possessed the slightest sense of humour things might have been very different between us, in spite of all the rest. But it is years too late for a reconciliation between us now – even if such a things were barely possible...

The third and current instalment, in his Leeton litany of complaint to George Robertson, is Mrs B, who has become a "regular Harpy". The kindly housekeeper is clearly ageing and feeling the strain of supporting Henry in Leeton, where he was supposed to be writing articles to encourage people to move into the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, known as the MIA. He preferred, it seems, to be MIA – Missing in Action, at the nearest pub.

And the fourth woman he was "closely connected with"? Ruth Park in her memoir says she'd read Henry's letter to George Robertson, and she'd wondered if the fourth woman was his dead younger sister, Gertrude's twin, who had died soon after birth. But I'm thinking the fourth woman is Hannah who, like the perfect muse, died before she could turn into a "hell-hag" like Louisa, Mrs L and Mrs B. If Ruth Park knew about Hannah, she was too respectful of Bertha to mention her; instead, she dwelt on the rumours around Mary Gilmore. I hear Mary claiming she was the fourth woman, such is her self-proclaimed influence on Henry's life; but Mary approved of Hannah, so she may have to settle for being an unspoken fifth.

Ruth concludes: "it was impossible to discern what indeed Henry Lawson wanted from women; it does not seem to have occurred to him that they wanted, needed or indeed deserved anything from him".²⁶⁹

She recalls too, as a much younger married women, talking to Bertha about men and in particular, her husband D'Arcy's penchant for "walkabouts". Ruth says Bertha called men's immaturity hormonal:

'In some persons adolescence goes on for a very long time. Few adolescents know there are other people in the world. Perhaps your man [D'Arcy] is a late bloomer...Some never do, of course.' And I thought I detected a sigh.²⁷⁰

* * *

Letter from Henry Lawson to the Woman's Page, *The Bulletin*, accompanied by a portrait, c. 1922:²⁷¹

Dear Woman's Page,

I got these portraits soiled and knocked about carrying them about the country with me. When my daughter attained her degree and majority last year, as you noted in your page, you could get no later portrait of her. While I was in hospital, I got her have one taken for her disreputable, old, dad, who have so far got over his disgust

²⁶⁸ Henry Lawson, Letter to George Robertson, 23 March, 1917, *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 317.

²⁶⁹ Ruth Park, *Fishing in the Styx*, 193-194

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*

²⁷¹ Henry Lawson, Letter to the Woman's Page, c. 1922, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 415.

at having a Bachelor of Arts in the family, as to persuade his old heart that he'd like to see this portrait in the Woman's Page.
The other portrait is of 'Jim'.
Yours, HENRY LAWSON
Please return portraits – H.L

* * *

There was another woman in Henry's life: his daughter. Barta became a librarian, and married writer and editor, Walter Jago, who himself had had a difficult marriage breakdown, which Barta alludes to in many of her letters to her mother that are now in the Mitchell Library. He was fifteen years older than her and I sense there was some scandal around their relationship, which Bertha deeply disapproved in her letters to her daughter. But, given her own life, it seems that Bertha was more upset about Barta and Walter living together before marriage.

Perhaps it is a reflection of how things are, that Barta grew up to be with a man who had had an acrimonious separation from his wife. Perhaps she understood all too well what Walter was going through because of her own childhood, watching separated and bitter parents.

In 1931 Barta and Henry's friend John Le Gay Brereton together edited the anthology of essays about her father, including her mother's contribution, *Memories*. She also told her niece, Sylvia Lawson, about her childhood and reflected about her parents.²⁷² In adulthood, she came to see the truth about her parents' marriage:²⁷³

Nobody could possibly blame mother for separating. There was no money. They could never be happy again. There was a dreadful situation, and we were young. And afterwards there were crises, bitter for Mother and overwhelming for Dad. But all that picture of our continuing devotion simply is not true. Mother, with quiet determination and ability, carved out her own successful life. A life she loved and never would have changed in any circumstances, a life of high fulfilment. Dad did not figure in our scheme of things.

But Jim remained close to his father:

Only Jim, without a thought, cut through it all to stand beside him...Between Jim and Dad there was an affection and bond as deep as the sea.²⁷⁴

* * *

Ruby is studying for a music oral presentation at school. Her long ponytail hangs down her back. She is taller than me now, restless and musical. She's a lot like her dad. She chooses jazz for her presentation, and reaches into her memories of him practising when she was a baby.

"What's a jazz standard?" she asks. I have potted knowledge of jazz from a decade living with her dad. He is away, she has messaged him, but she's anxious whether she'll get him in time before the presentation.

²⁷² Lawson [Jago], Unpublished Notes.

²⁷³ *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*

"It's a song that all jazz musicians know," I say. "You know them probably. Do you remember *Summertime*? You said that song..."

She cuts me off, laughing. "Yes, I remember. I said it was about you and Dad".

"Your daddy's rich and your mama's good lookin'," she sings. I laugh, remembering the song:²⁷⁵

Oh your daddy is rich,
And your mama good lookin'
So hush little baby, don't you cry...

And I thought, she was the little baby, and she did cry about us.

* * *

I worry sometimes that I will be blamed for my marriage breakdown. That somehow I could have stayed, and everything would have lurched on. Like the bus that Ruby and I are on, where talk has strayed to her dad.

"Is there a fine line between love and hate?" Ruby asks as the bus brakes again. I grab the handrail to steady myself. Being a teenager, love preoccupies her a lot now. "It's good you and Dad talk. You don't hate him".

"Maybe we split before we started to hate each other. I just can't hate him. I don't want to be with him, but I can't hate him. I should. But I don't".

"It would be weird for you and dad to still be together," Ruby says suddenly.

"Why?" I ask.

"You are both slightly insane".

* * *

I consider moving closer to Ruby's cousins. A compromise, I think, between going home to my parents and maintaining the status quo, my life and hers. We are staying with her cousins for the weekend when I suggest to her that we move here.

"What do you think?" I ask.

She hesitates. I'm surprised. She's asked me to do this so many times before. The beach life with her cousins will suit her. They already go to the same school together. Ruby now takes a long and circuitous bus route from our house to get to school, or she stays overnight with them during the week.

"I don't think you should do that for me," she says. "I want to live with dad".

"Your dad? In L.A.?" We are sitting on the blue-and-white wicker couches, with her cousins' dog lolling at our feet.

"I want to live with him," she repeats, determined.

²⁷⁵ George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, and Dubose Heyward, 'Summertime'. (USA: George Gershwin Music, Ira Gershwin Music, Du Bose and Dorothy Heyward Memorial Fund Publishing, and Nokawi Music, 1934).

“We can talk about it,” I say cautiously. She practises wobbly cartwheels in anticipation of cheerleading at an American school.

I can’t imagine a life without her, so far away from me. For the last decade, our lives have been entwined without her dad. It was hard enough letting her stay overnight with her cousins during part of the school week. But I want her to know her father.

I feel sad when I read Barta’s last memories of her dad. You don’t need to be separated geographically to not have a relationship. Henry and his daughter were in the same city, yet strangers, which happens so much today.

I start discussing Ruby moving with her father. His wife is enthusiastic and she envisions Ruby and a baby living in their house. Happy families. In the months that follow they often Skype and then Ruby goes to visit them for school holidays, to meet her new stepmother.

I should be jealous, but I’m so grateful to this woman for doing what I couldn’t – giving Ruby a father.

“Don’t screw this up,” I tell him. It’s not too late.

31.

Letter from Henry Lawson, Coast Hospital, Little Bay, Sydney to Bertha Lawson, dated September 23, 1921:²⁷⁶

Dear Bertha

The last morning at the Coast hospital. I'd hardly seen the last of your and young Bertha's 'tails' when "Bernard Shaw" came into my room and sat down. Therefore, my temper. I didn't kill him, but if he'd stayed a half-an-hour longer...

Yours Sincerely,

H.L

Lord Howe Island, January 3, 1922!

* * *

Nearly two decades after their split and it seems on a first reading of the optimistic postscript 'Lord Howe Island, 1922!' that Bertha and Henry are planning a holiday together the following year. But Colin Roderick, in his notes that accompany his edition of Henry's letters, clarifies that they planned nothing of the sort. He explains that the Lord Howe reference was an idea being floated by Henry's brother-in-law, the future premier J.T Lang, to send him on another recuperation, literally an ocean away from Sydney's pubs.

As Henry signalled to his surprise in 1917, his and Bertha's acrimony has faded like the ink on their divorce calligraphy paper. And in 1922, Darlinghurst Gaol began its metamorphosis from bars and brutality into the East Sydney Technical College, which later became the National Art School.

Artists and models begin to flow through the gates that once locked Henry from the street. I wonder if he'd hobbled past those sandstone walls and ever dared to go inside.

* * *

I've been given an oval, unattributed miniature of a frail man with big brown eyes, around which the artist has painted deep wrinkles and baggy eyes bulging with ill-health, but I'm unconvinced it is Henry. The man in the portrait has Henry's eyes and a moustache, but the moustache seems too thin. It is frail, like the man. I find a photo of Henry taken in 1922, at a wharf, in a suit and hat; even with the pixilation of the enlargement, I can see his moustache is still squirrel thick.

Henry remained a face in the street that people recognised, but he was now regarded with curiosity and pity rather than admiration. Despite still being published by the *Bulletin*, Gilmore says Henry was, "bitter and sad"²⁷⁷ about the disdain he felt at the *Bulletin* office. He would hobble to Bulletin Place on a stick, partially paralysed after a stroke. Biographer Denton Prout notes that Henry, now 56, looked tired and frail; he shook.

Maybe the mysterious, unsigned portrait is Henry in his final days. Shuffling from bookshop to bottle shop to the *Bulletin* office, where Mary Gilmore says, "he was treated with rudeness and contempt", Henry

²⁷⁶ Henry Lawson, Letter to Bertha Lawson, 23 September, 1921, in *Henry Lawson Letters: 1890–1922*, ed. Roderick, 408.

²⁷⁷ Mary Gilmore, note accompanying poem 'Ghost Haunted the Street He Goes,' 23 February 1952, Lawson Collection (Lawson 164), University of Sydney Library.

becomes a caricature of the alcoholic bohemian writer. E.J 'Ted' Brady, visiting Sydney from Queensland, found him arguing in the cashier's office at the *Bulletin*. He offered to take Henry for a drink:²⁷⁸

It was a yarn I wanted, more than refreshment; but I had promised his wife twenty years previously that I would not drink with him. Twenty years being, penally, the term of a man's natural life, we agreed that there could be no breach of faith in the matter; especially as I was going no further down the broad path with him than the demon of dry ginger ale could drag me – and for other reasons. I had not seen him in some time and noticed that he had aged in appearance. He put down the tankard and took up the pipe in a tired way. We looked quizzically at each other and there was a pause. Our minds were picking up the thread of memories, memories, memories! Australians are rather ashamed of emotion, expressed or understood so I took him by the sleeve, looked into those brown spaniel eyes – there was a light in them I'd never seen there before – the homing light – and said with a heartiness I did not quite feel;

'You – old sinner, you ought to have been dead long ago!'

'Why? Why did you think that?'

'The way you knock yourself about'.

He pretended to think it over very carefully – a way he had.

'Beer saved my life', he said at last in a voice of simple conviction.

'Beer?'

'Yeth, Ted – *Beer*'.

'I cannot see how beer preserved your life'.

'Well,' he clinched, after taking a long pull, 'it *did*. If I'd been drinking hard tack I would have been dead long ago'.

* * *

On the night of September 1, 1922, Henry was at the Abbotsford cottage in which he lived with Mrs Byers. After the evening meal and ale, he told Mrs Byers he'd rest, and then write all night. She kept the kettle on, as it was normal for him to have tea after an evening rest.

Around 9pm, when she was in bed, she heard a cry: "little woman!"²⁷⁹

She recalls: "Now I sadly sit and ponder and his voice seems ever near saying, 'Come, bring your chair on this side, sit close that I may hear.' Ah me, it cuts me like a knife, the things that once have been".

²⁷⁸ EJ Brady, 'Mallacoota Days,' *Henry Lawson by His Mates*, eds. Bertha Lawson [Jago] and J Le Gay Brereton (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1931), 132–133.

²⁷⁹ 'Reminiscences of Henry Lawson by Isabel Byers,' ed. Curtis

32.

Letter from Bertha Lawson dated September 8, 1922 to Dame Mary Gilmore, c/o The Worker Office, St Andrews Place:²⁸⁰

Madam,

Your letter to the Daily Mail was shown to me this morning. I could expect nothing else from you. Too long have I kept silent so that Harry's memory should never suffer. Now when I return to Sydney I shall let the public know the truth both as to yourself, and as to Mrs. Byers. You are not aware that the Captain of the ship (the Karlsruhe) gave me your letter that you had posted to my husband. That letter had been shown to the late Mr. Farrell of the Daily Telegraph. Also to several other friends in Sydney who know the true facts of your conduct in my home in England and also on the voyage to Australia.

It would be impossible to appeal to any womanly feeling in you. May I ask you to refrain from rushing into print to pose as a friend of my late husband.

Yours etc.

Bertha Lawson.

* * *

Henry's women come to the funeral. His first love and friend, Mary Gilmore; his daughter, Barta; Mrs Byers; Bertha. All staring at his casket adorned with wattle.

Writer Zora Cross says the women wept together. "I heard from Mrs. Jago [Barta] Mrs. Byers broke down at the grave-side [sic]. She told me that Mrs. Byers sat apart weeping bitterly afterwards and Mrs. Lawson went over to her and comforted her".²⁸¹

In the days after the funeral, Mary and Bertha clashed yet again. On September 8, Mary had a letter published in the *Sydney Daily Mail* paying tribute to the grieving "little landlady" and publicly calling for an allowance in recognition of her caring for the poet until his death.

Mrs Byers, Mary writes:

for so many years kept house for Lawson, figures so often in his writings, cared for him in sickness and in health, and was with him to the last. As a woman and as an Australian, I wish to pay my tribute to Mrs Byers, whose declining years begin to fall heavily upon her...I would like to suggest that either by public subscription or through the State, the house Henry Lawson died in, or one in which he had lived, be bought and 'the little landlady' installed with a sufficient allowance, or salary, as caretaker for such Lawson relics as may be kept there.

...It seems a thing a woman should suggest if only in recognition of another woman's long and faithful friendship with Lawson – Yours, etc., MARY GILMORE.

Reading the letter, I initially read it as it appears – a tribute to Mrs Byers, the little landlady. Bertha's warning letter in response, written later that day in a flare of anger, seems disproportionate to the words. But thinking about what the letter implies, I see the scalpel slicing subtly through the text. Mary is publicly reminding Bertha and the public that she judicially separated from Henry and had no part in his later life and

²⁸⁰ Bertha Lawson, Letter to Mary Gilmore, n.d. 1922, in Dame Mary Gilmore papers 1911–1954, A3292, State Library of NSW.

²⁸¹ Zora Cross, Lawson Collection (Lawson 204), Rare Books and Special Collections, Fisher Library, University of Sydney.

has no right to his legacy. She implies that there was only one woman in Henry's life that loved him – Mrs Byers. Hannah had died twenty years before.

Rose Scott clarified the searing subtext when she defended Bertha later that month in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*:²⁸²

As one who has been on the most intimate terms of friendship with the family for a quarter of a century I have been much pained and greatly grieved at statements (not in the *Herald*) which seem to belittle and discredit his widow and children. Knowing as I do the noble part that Mrs. Bertha Lawson has played during the whole period of our friendship, knowing the bitter anguish she has suffered and the strenuous time through which she has passed while making a home and educating her two children, knowing how both for the sake of the children and their father she has suffered in silence during all those long, weary, heartbreaking years, it does seem to me the very utmost refinement of cruelty that one word should have been uttered which was calculated to give her pain.

In conclusion I would express my honest conviction that no truer or more loyal woman, no more loving, devoted and self-sacrificing mother ever lived, toiled, and suffered for children and husband than the widow of Australia's greatest writer and sweetest songster, Henry Lawson. I am, etc., ROSE SCOTT.

After Mary received Bertha's warning letter in response to her tribute to Mrs Byers, and reminding her of their clashes in England and aboard *the Karlsruhe* two decades earlier, Mary, in an equal flare of ink, sat down and began her never-published memoir, *Henry Lawson and I*, in which she detailed her friendship with Henry and her enduring animosity to Bertha. In this memoir, Mary also claims that she knew about Henry's death before Bertha did. She received the news from Philip Harris, the photographer who in 1922 took that last photo of Henry, on the wharf.

Harris had apparently gone to Abbotsford, where Mary says he found:

Henry dead on the floor in a corner in his room and two of Mr. George Robertson's men there. Mrs Byers was stupefied by shock...He [Phil] told me of the bare scantily furnished room, of the undrawn blinds, of the poor body under a dirty blanket on the floor, and of the absence of anyone able to look after him save helpless, poor old Mrs Byers.²⁸³

Phil asked the NSW Premier for a state funeral, but was refused. Mary suggested going higher:

Suddenly I remembered that the Prime Minister, Mr W.M Hughes, was to be in Sydney that evening or next morning. 'Hughes,' I said. 'He will give a state funeral, no question about that!'²⁸⁴

The Journalists' Association approached Billy Hughes, who granted the funeral that she claims she and Phil Harris organised. So Mary was miffed when she read comments by Barta in the *Daily Mail* that the funeral arrangements for the service at St Andrew's Cathedral had been in consultation with the family:

The remark made by Lawson's friends was: 'She is very much her mother's daughter!' No arrangements were made in consultation with them; they had not even troubled to enquire after him, alive or dead. For months he had lived where he died, and had been in the house of his last days for two or three weeks. His address was known as at Angus & Robertson...*The Bulletin*...to scores of others. It was always available and never secret...Mrs Lawson did not wish to go to the funeral but Phillip Harris

²⁸² Rose Scott, 'Henry Lawson – To the Editor of the Herald,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 1922, 6.

²⁸³ Gilmore, 'Personal History: Henry Lawson and I.'

²⁸⁴ *ibid*, 27.

persuaded her saying that in after years the children might regret it if they did not appear, and also, because it would create talk if none of them were there.²⁸⁵

The *Sydney Morning Herald* and other Sydney papers reported Bertha was indeed there, at one of the “simplest yet most impressive services held in the Cathedral”.²⁸⁶

Under “Mourners” *the Herald* gave Bertha pole position, which Mary clearly thought should have been awarded to Mrs Byers and herself. The paper began:

The chief mourners and relatives were: Mrs Henry Lawson (widow), Miss Bertha and Mr James Lawson (children); Mrs G.O’Connor (sister); Mr Peter Lawson and Mr Charles Lawson (brothers).

It then listed other relatives and family friends, including Mrs Byers. Six paragraphs down, after the Federal and NSW politicians, and University representatives, the paper finally listed “Mary Gilmore” buried among the names of Henry’s bohemian friends.

* * *

In 1931, nine years after the funeral, Bertha attended the unveiling of Henry’s statue in the Domain by the Governor General Sir Phillip Game. She stood on the ceremonial platform with their children and her sister-in-law, Hilda, now the wife of NSW Premier Jack Lang, in pole position once more.

Neither Bertha’s prominent presence nor the statue’s unveiling sat well with some of Henry’s friends. It was seen as a mockery of the neglect that had been shown to him in his later years. E.J Brady saw the literary lionising after his death:

After treating him as a man of no account, they then lifted him to a statue in the Sydney Domain when he was dead! This is the way creative genius is rewarded in Australia...the best country in the world for jockeys and race course touts, the worst for people of culture.²⁸⁷

Bertha, however, seems to have welcomed the celebrations, as did Barta. Jim, who became a schoolteacher, was more reticent and retreated into his life, leaving a few letters and drawings that have been swept up into the archives with other memories. In 1931, Bertha contributed to her daughter’s co-edited anthology, which was published to coincide with the unveiling of George Lambert’s statue. In 1943, she published her memoirs, pointedly called *My Henry Lawson*. Two years later, in 1945 – by now a middle-aged lady in glasses, hat and printed dress – she unveiled the Henry Lawson Memorial College with State Premier, William McKell. She pops up at a memorial to Henry Lawson at Eurundee with Clive Evatt. Streets and reserves are opened by her. She is in demand for ribbon cutting.

I think about Bertha as widow. It was paradoxical that on one hand she alleged domestic violence, drunkenness and despair; and yet she came to celebrate the very man at whose hands she claimed to have so suffered. But her life was entwined with his too. Perhaps she’d recognised, long before Henry died, what

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*

²⁸⁶ ‘Henry Lawson – State Funeral – Impressive Service,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 1922, 10. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16022883>.

²⁸⁷ Quoted in Denton Prout, *Henry Lawson The Grey Dreamer*, 220.

George Robertson had warned before their marriage: that he was a genius, but difficult to live with.

Her critics say she'd grasped only one thing: his fame.

Mrs Byers – Mrs B – retreated into obscurity, and her memories. Mary Gilmore's calls for a public purse funding for her was forgotten, like the woman herself. Zora Cross writes:

I don't know what happened to Mrs. Byers. She seemed to be very poor. I heard of her once more a couple of years after Lawson's death. Mrs. Lucy Cassidy, who was then Nurse Sullivan nursed Lawson in his last illness and she was my nurse at the time. She mentioned Mrs. Byers to me. She told me that Mrs. Byers was subject to fainting turns and liked smelling salts, which she couldn't afford to buy.

Lucy said that Mary Gilmore had bought a rather expensive bottle of the stuff for Mrs. Byers when she found she hadn't any. But as Mrs Gilmore had had the silver top inscribed: 'Presented to Mrs. Byers, friend of Henry Lawson by Mary Gilmore'...Mrs. Byers though it too grand to use and never used the bottle. She regarded it as a Lawson relic, which it was undoubtedly.

At the time I chanced to have the only bottle of smelling salts I ever possessed...Naturally I insisted Lucy take it to Mrs. Byers on condition that she didn't say who had sent it to her but on the understanding it be used...I hope it was. It was my only link with Henry Lawson's devoted friend. D.M.W [Zora's de facto husband, the writer and critic, David McKee Wright] had given the little green bottle to me. So it linked us all in a way.²⁸⁸

Henry's children mourned a lost father and missed meetings. Barta recalls:

I was told, after his funeral, that just before he died he had a garbled message, that he thought was from me, to meet him at a City corner. I heard that, exhausted and sick as he was, he went there and stood for long over an hour and would not go away, in hope that I might come.

...Someone I knew very well asked me after he died, 'Bertha, seeing your Father as we did in the last years, derelict about the City streets, tell me could you love him? Could you be proud of him, for himself, as a man?' Yes, I could be very proud of him, for himself, as a man. He had nothing but look what he gave. And look what he gave to me. Love, Freedom, joy in life, everything I dreamed about, everything I hoped for. It came from him.

If it had not been for him Walter's [Jago] strong hands could never have lifted me out of my own loneliness and deep distress. If I had not edited the 'Mateship' book with Walter we would have never known companionship and love with all that went with it, and all that came after. Quite simply and sincerely I owe him my whole happiness. It was his gift to me. I can love him because he stands above us all. Because his fun and his friendship, his troubled, tragic spirit, his rugged ways, the vision that he never lost, the hopes that were all broken, his kindness and despair, his heart and soul poured out, everything he thought and everything he wrote for our great heritage, were as much a part of him as his drinking. And I am like him, and I understand.²⁸⁹

How do you mourn a parent you never really knew? You scrape memories for clues.

²⁸⁸ Zora Cross, 'Recollections of Henry Lawson,' 34.

²⁸⁹ Barta Lawson [Jago], Unpublished Notes.

33.

The coastal walk curls around to Waverley Cemetery. "My niece died..." says a walker heading the other way. Then it is quiet.

There are fifty thousand gravesites spread across the cliff here. A crowd of ghosts. The sun bleaches the headstones and mottles the cement. Hardy weeds coil over the plots and grow through cracked marble tiles. The sea salt blows in, corroding memorial plates to an eerie green. The old palms are windburnt. Nothing fragile lives here, except faith.

I move deeper into the cemetery, past crumbling statues and forgotten crypts. I am lost among the angels. A lawnmower's grinding hum breaks the silence. I make my way over to a man dressed in gardening gear, to protect his ears and skin from the noise and the sun. He is mowing the grassy pews that branch off the cemetery roads. The grass is dying in the summer heat.

He kills the mower and takes off his earmuffs and sunglasses. The sunglass mark around his eyes is as white as the marble statues around us.

"Where's Henry Lawson's grave?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says, thinking. Then he points down the road. "Down there, and turn left. It's up there. There's a sign". The mower hums back into life.

I follow the directions. A ute blocks the cemetery road and two maintenance men are up a grassy pew shifting sand. "I think I'll lie down for a bit," one says, and lies on a double grassy grave.

Further on, I see the sign the mower mentioned. On a peeling post, it is handwritten in purple paint: "Henry Lawson this aisle".

I walk up the pew with graves either side of me. I've seen a newspaper photo taken on the day of his funeral, showing hundreds of mourners gathered around his grave. All the plots look forgotten now. Mary Gilmore says that she wanted him moved to a more prominent position in the cemetery, but Bertha wouldn't allow it. A catfight to the end.

I was about to keep walking when I realise who is in the grave. I walk back three paces and double-check the grave, raised on a bed of cement and scattered with gravel, topped with a large faded shell, two smaller conches and a dried, curled starfish.

Given he was the "bush poet" I'm surprised to see shells on Henry's grave. But then I read the quotation inscribed onto the stone:

Love hangs about thy name like music around a shell
No heart can take of thee a tame farewell.

I notice another plaque inscribed at the bottom of the gravestone: "In Loving Memory of his wife Bertha Marie Louise Lawson Died 19 July 1957, aged 81".

His wife. Despite the court orders, the fights, the jailing, the suffering, Bertha and Henry have been buried together. I appreciate the symbolism of her at the foot of Henry's grave. His wife is a footnote on his life.

* * *

Ruby cuts out letters spelling “Free” and pastes them on her guitar case. Wanderer’s blood.

Her cat paces around her as she packs. She is travelling with her aunt and cousin to Los Angeles and, for the first time since she was four, she will be living with her father again.

* * *

The airport shifts with people. Flight times roll over on the departure screens. Her blonde ponytailed cousin bounces on the food court chair.

We walk together to Customs.

I can’t go any further with her.

* * *

Runners sweat on the path past Henry’s statue in the Domain. Storm clouds mount behind the city skyline.

I am asked more than once about Bertha: “Why do you want to know about *her*?” She has no poetry, no statues, no streets or reserves named after her. There are only a few letters, a dusty memoir and some accusations recorded by court documents, left to remember her by. A footnote.

I remember what Bertha wrote to Henry at the peak of their separation hostilities. She was pregnant, frightened and angry. She felt vulnerable. *I have suffered.*

I think about Henry loitering around the bookshop, awkwardly making conversation with his daughter, who he doesn’t know. I think about the constant exhaustion I felt and of Ruby – trying to put my wedding ring back on my finger; of her little, long body curled up as she cried “I miss him”. I think of Barta’s regret.

I notice the swag at the back of the statue. To fill its pages over the languid January weeks, *The Australian* has been running extracts from *The Penguin Book of Australian Bush Writing*, and has republished Lawson’s short story, *The Romance of the Swag*,²⁹⁰ written in 1907, four years after Bertha filed for judicial separation.

Henry’s first paragraph struck me:

The Australian swag fashion is the easiest way in the world of carrying a load. I ought to know something about carrying loads: I’ve carried babies, which are the heaviest and most awkward and heartbreaking loads in this world for a boy or man to carry, I fancy. God remember mothers who slave about the housework (and do sometimes a man’s work in addition in the bush) with a heavy, squalling kid on one arm!”²⁹¹

The heaviest heartbreak is leaving the child, I think. It is the weight of guilt carried around with the swag which is full of a roaming, solitary life, compounded by the heartbreak felt by the child who is left, often before they understand. And I think of the day, a century later, when my daughter’s father began a life with a swag of a suitcase swinging by his side.

²⁹⁰ Henry Lawson, ‘The Romance of the Swag,’ in *The Romance of the Swag*. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1914).

²⁹¹ *ibid.*

“You know, the second time I went away, I saw you and Ruby standing on the steps,” he told me once.
“You both looked so sad. I nearly stopped the cab”.

I touch the sandstone blocks that raise Henry high.

He stands over me. The gum leaves are still.

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Exegesis:

Introduction

Early in the process of writing a memoir of single parenting I was told that the Australian poet and short story writer, Henry Lawson, had been incarcerated in Darlinghurst Gaol for non-payment of child support. I read that the jailing occurred after his wife, Bertha Lawson, had been granted a judicial separation from Henry in 1903, and I came across court documents and letters between them, written before and after their separation, that were striking in their contemporary resonance to parents in conflict today.

Much of the above archival material had already been published; Manning Clark wrote a biography of Henry Lawson in 1978 and the Lawson scholar, Colin Roderick, responded in 1982 and 1991. More obscure biographies (Pearson, 1968; Prout, 1963) existed, and recently – as always seems the case when your sphere of interest swings to a subject – more Lawson stories have appeared. They include a dual biography of Lawson and Banjo Paterson (Knight, 2015), a play also about the same two poets *Dead Man Talking* (Cullen, 2015), *Mates* (Bryan, 2016) about Lawson's friendship with Jim Graeme, and Leah Purcell's acclaimed reworking of the Lawson short story *The Drover's Wife* (2016) for which she won the Victorian Prize for Literature.

I was intrigued, however, by Bertha's experiences of single motherhood in the early 1900s, an undercurrent to the dominant narratives of the Lawson legend. My resulting work of literary journalism focused on the marriage and separation of Bertha Lawson, overlaid with a memoir about single parenting now. *Mrs L* became a broader multi-layered story grounded in the social history of separation and divorce across a century.

As my research continued, so did my awareness of the absent voice of Bertha in Lawson biographies, and I began writing what Nigel Hamilton describes as the 'biography as corrective' (2016, p. 15). Commenting on changing biographical practices, Barbara Caine notes:

It is rare for a biography written before the 1970s to take much account of a behaviour of a man in relation to his wife and female relatives, or attempt to see him from their perspective rather than his – especially if there was any difficulty or tension in these domestic relationships. (2010, pp. 106-107)

Caine describes this practice as 'the silencing of women' (p. 107). As will be discussed in this exegesis, biographies of Henry Lawson (Roderick, 1982, 1991; Clark, 1978; Prout, 1963) have given scant regard to Bertha Lawson beyond framing her as a destructive distraction to Lawson's creative life. Bertha contributed to an anthology of Lawson co-edited by her daughter (also named Bertha) in 1931, and writes her own memoir in 1943. In recent decades, beyond Meg Tasker and Lucy Sussex's (2007) empathetic discussion of Bertha's life in London, she has remained an absent voice in the Lawson narrative.

Having found my double subject (Bertha and myself), and slowly realising in the process of writing *Mrs L* that I was creating a hybrid genre, I needed to find other texts that slipped between the traditional genres of memoir, or biography, and that also used literary journalism techniques. It seemed important to compare the approaches of other authors who included the self and biographical subject in the same text. Stan Grant's *Talking to My Country* (2016), a memoir of growing up Indigenous in Australia, and Clare Wright's

group biography, *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* (Wright, 2013) detailing the women of the goldfields, are exemplary texts that not only intersect with literary journalism but also use epistolary sources and are examples of revisionist history. Janet Malcolm's biography of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas' relationship, *Two Lives* (2007), was chosen due to Malcolm's recognition as a literary journalist (Forde, 2008) and because it is an example of the auto / biography genre – a genre I realised I too was writing. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson clearly define the auto / biography (a / b) as one of 52 life narrative genres:

The acronym signals the inter-relatedness of autobiographical narrative and biography. Although the slash marks their fluid boundary, they are in several senses different, even opposed, forms. The term also designates a mode of the autobiographical that inserts biography / ies within an autobiography, or the converse, a personal narrative within a biography. (2001, p. 184)

The question then became one of poetics: how do literary journalism techniques in biography and/or memoir illuminate absent voices from their historical shadows? Tracing the lineage of literary journalism, John Hartsock lists various descriptors:

The genre has been designated as narrative journalism, creative non-fiction, the nonfiction novel, literary nonfiction, literary reportage, reportage literature, the ocherk in Russian, baogao wenxue in Chinese and nuevo periodismo in Colombia, among the many times that have been applied, revealing, clearly, a heterogeneity to the subject. (2016, p. 3)

In essence, all these terms refer to narratives that use techniques associated with fiction to tell a factual story. Sue Joseph, however, lists literary journalism as a sub-genre of creative non-fiction, noting that in Australia 'some of the leading proponents of this type of long form narrative may well be literary but do not regard themselves as journalists, nor what they do as journalism' (2010, p. 82).

specific description: 'long-form reporting written with the flair of the novelist or short story writer. In other words, non-fiction written using literary techniques such as characterisation, dialogue and description' (2015, n/p). 'Flair' may suggest that the writing is flamboyant, but, like minimalist fiction, literary journalism can be sparsely written yet compelling in its story detail, as exemplified by John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (Schulte, 2014) and exhibit Sims' (2012) six characteristics of literary journalism which can be understood as the poetics of literary journalism: elaborate structures, the active presence of the author, character, symbolism, immersion and accuracy.

Given literary journalism's relationship to fictional devices – with the caveat of accuracy – the creative research tradition of poetics is a harmonious and legitimate methodological approach to discussing how literary journalism techniques illuminate absent voices in works of biography and memoir such as *Mrs L*. Kim Laksy writes:

...poetics has become the means by which writers formulate and discuss an attitude to their work that recognises influences, the traditions they write within and develop, the literary, social, and political context in which they write and the processes of composition and revision they undertake. (2013, p. 17)

This exegesis posits that *Mrs L* and the exemplary texts *Two Lives*, *Talking to My Country* and *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* all exhibit Sim's practice-based methodology that is essentially the poetics of fact (Frus, 1994; Greenberg, 2010). Sims' characteristics expand upon Tom Wolfe's earlier proposed methodology of literary journalism ('new journalism') – scene by scene construction, point of view, dialogue-in-full and

status life which he describes as 'the broad sense of the entire pattern of behaviour and possessions through which people express their position in the world to be' (1975, pp. 46-47). Arguably Sims' poetics of literary journalism give the writer more flexibility than Wolfe's. As Hartsock notes, Sims' characteristics are designed to free the voice and 'depend heavily on authorial intention and conventional understandings of rhetorical construction' (2000, p. 256).

As an exegesis, the structure does not exactly follow that of more traditional scholarly PhDs (Kroll, 2004). Indeed, Jillian Hamilton who co-authored a content analysis of 60 examined exegeses (2010) observes that 'writing an exegesis is a uniquely challenging process' (2014, p. 370). Accordingly, this exegesis has a non-traditional connective structure comprising introduction, situating concepts, precedents of practice, the researcher's creative practice and conclusion (2014, p. 371). Hamilton argues that the above approach to the exegesis is a hybrid of the 'third person posture of academic activity' exegesis model known as 'Context' (p. 371), and the 'reflexive account of the challenges, insights and achievements of the practice' known as 'Commentary' (p. 371). Hamilton writes of her co-authored study:

We called it a 'Connective exegesis' because by looking out both towards the established field and inwards towards the practice, it serves to connect the research outcomes to the ongoing research trajectory of the field'. (p. 371)

As such, there are no separate literature review or methodology chapters. My core research questions are: What have I written? How can my practice be understood within the scholarship around literary journalism, memoir, biography and the auto / biography genre? What texts can be analysed to shed light on my own work? These questions are answered within the chapters that follow. The scholarly literature and issues of methodology are entwined within these chapters.

Chapter One 'Literary Journalism and Biography' expands upon Sims' poetics of literary journalism in depth in relation to *Two Lives* and *Mrs L*. Robert Miller and John Brewer (2003) articulate one method behind biographic writing:

The biographical method is the collection and analysis of an intensive account of a whole portion or portion of a life usually by an in-depth, unstructured interview. The account may be reinforced by semi-structured interviewing or personal documents. Rather than concentrating upon a 'snapshot' of an individual's present situation, the biographical approach emphasizes the placement of the individual within a nexus of social connections, historical events and life experiences (life history). An important sub-stream of the method focuses upon the manner in which the respondent actively constructs a narrative of their life in response to the social context of the interview (the life story). (2003, p. 15)

Discussing contemporary methodologies of biography, Miller and Brewer cite two approaches: the analysis of biographical information as a means of evaluating concepts and the methodology of narrative, which arguably is practiced more often:

A second perspective influenced by post-modernist viewpoints and ethno-methodology, can be termed 'the narrative'. 'Narrativists' emphasise the essentially fluid nature of the interplay that takes place during the social context of an interview when a narrative constructs their life story for a listener. (p. 16)

My biographical subject, Bertha Lawson, died in 1957, so could not be interviewed. For the contemporary memoir element of the thesis some semi-structured interviewing was conducted with my daughter Ruby, her aunt and her father; and for the biography, a historian at the National Art School.

Primarily, archival investigation similar to the methods employed by historians was undertaken, and as a result this exegesis argues that archival and epistolary research can provide a replacement for the literary journalism technique of interviews and immersion.

Moving from biography to memoir, Chapter Two 'Memoir, the Cultural Self and the Auto / Biography Genre' extends Thomas Larson's (2007) suggestion that memoir is framed by the socio-political cultural experience. The chapter posits that writing about the self can enhance, not distract, from the main biographical subject in a work of auto / biography because of this socio-political framing. As aforementioned the a / b genre incorporates first person in the writing of biography, a practice David Marr more colloquially calls the quest biography (2016-2017, p. 66).

The chapter begins by discussing Stan Grant's memoir of growing up Indigenous in Australia. *Talking to My Country* is an exemplar of the relationship between culture and self in memoir that Larson suggests is the memoir's social purpose (2016, p. 189). He goes on to say:

Linking experience to one's persona, one's culture, one's ideas, the memoirist uses dramatic narrative and reflective analysis to bridge the details and the expanse of what he's unleashed. Story alone won't do it. The memoir's prime stylistic distinction is a give-and-take between narrative and analysis. (p. 23)

The chapter then expands to discussing the socio-political role of the self in the a / b genre. I use the term 'cultural self' to distinguish this writing from the biography element of the a / b work. I acknowledge 'cultural self' has been used in intercultural communication scholarship (Schauber 2002, p. 29) and I am further informed by Caroline Calvillo (2003) who posits the 'multicultural self' as a pathway to autobiographical construction in American culture. Katherine Nelson (2003) constructs the narrative self in relation to memory, and Victor De Munck's articulation of the self underlines how the self is constructed by culture (2000, p. 7).

In *Mrs L* my contemporary experience of single parenting reflects upon the biography of Bertha Lawson. In doing so I engage as the cultural self in the history of politics of marriage and divorce in Australia. Similarly in the literary journalism work *Two Lives*, Janet Malcolm, writing in the first person, reflects upon her experience of reading Gertrude Stein, and *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* (Toklas, 1954) to answer the question: How did a high profile Jewish lesbian couple survive Nazi occupied France?

Chapter Three 'Revisionist Biography and Absent Voices' focuses on the practice of biography as corrective (Hamilton, 2016) and how the poetics of literary journalism can illuminate absent voices in works such as *Mrs L*. The latter text has been preceded by a surge of women's biographies, as discussed by Linda Wagner-Martin (1994) and Barbara Caine (2010), particularly those of literary legends' wives since the 1970s (Milford, 1970).

Biographer Nigel Hamilton observes of his own practice that the 'polemical intent' of such biographies can be controversial and 'the biographer must see any negative fallout as, to some extent, a measure of the work's significance as challenging and correcting society's myths' (2016, p. 26). Hamilton argues that a sense of purpose informs the actual practice, which further feeds into the wider ethical debates of writing biography and memoir. He suggests that such purpose reflects the intent of Plutarch and Suetonius who 'came to see their mission as contesting the popular myths and received opinions of their time, and subjecting them to diligent biographical examination' (2016, p. 27). He further comments:

As I see it, this sense is not a priori justification or agenda but grows organically...It emerges only gradually after the biographer, after due process, goes through serial iteration to refine the outcome, and finally 'pins to the page' an account of the chosen life, or partial life – often after many years of research and reflection (2016, p. 27).

Reflecting on the reception of his work of John F Kennedy, *JFK: Reckless Youth*, Hamilton further warns such books incite ire as they disrupt established tropes:

Not only has the biographer to accept that he or she has no monopoly on truth, but that contesting other people's views, especially in the area of reputation, will likely have repercussions that are often uncomfortable. The quality of research and presentation skills must be therefore deeper and more convincing than that of most historians if the work is to achieve its polemical intent – and the biographer must see the negative fallout as, to some extent, a measure of the work's significance in challenging and correcting society's myths (2016, p. 26).

Finally, Chapter Four 'The Uses of Epistolary in Literary Journalism' reflects upon how archival material such as letters and diaries, along with contemporary digital epistolary material including emails and texts, can replace the literary journalism technique of immersion to illuminate voice. Broadening the exegesis beyond the auto / biography genre to span from self to collective (Caine, 2010), this chapter discusses the use of epistolary material in the group biography *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* as well as *Mrs L*, to show how letters can illuminate absent voices. This raises issues around archival methodology.

Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz declared an 'archive fever' in which documents are essentially under 'house arrest' (1995, p. 9). Yet archives have their own histories in how they have been constructed, preserved and accessed. Antoinette Burton also highlights that:

history is not merely a project of fact retrieval...but also a set of complex processes of selection, interpretation and even creative invention...many if not most historians operate under the assumption that history is a highly interpretive act (2006, p. 8).

Perhaps with acknowledging interpretation in mind, Paul Murray Kendall suggests that much archival material is beyond the judicial, scientific and historical tests of evidence. It is the 'unstable stuff of letters, diary, conversations, hearsay...that may yield more in their lies, omissions, elusiveness, and euphemisms' (1965, p. 22). In short, Kendall is warning that epistolary material is dangerously interpretative.

In the context of Bertha Lawson, whose archival material is part of the Lawson Family archive and Henry Lawson's Lothian Papers at the State Libraries of NSW and Victoria respectively, Kendall's comments are pertinent. Bertha's letters have been ignored, dismissed or glossed over in histories of Henry Lawson, suggesting that approaching the archives with a different historical eye unearths a re-reading of the archive as female (Bertha) rather than male (Henry).

Letters, court documents and Darlinghurst Gaol records now lodged with the State Archives and Records NSW provided additional archival, evidence-based material. Bertha Lawson's domestic violence allegations are contained in a signed affidavit lodged with the couple's divorce records at the State Archives and Records NSW. These documents are now on public record and at the time of the Lawsons' separation, the 'Divorce Court' was actively followed by reporters and its proceedings were published weekly with identifying details of the parties involved.

A note about ethics

As a work of literary journalism that was also a memoir involving a child and an ex-husband, *Mrs L* was an ethical challenge. As Willa McDonald writes when considering the ethics of writing a memoir about adopting (which, like single parenting, involved writing about a child), ‘the whole idea of memoir is looking rather hard’ (2010, n/p). Firstly there are restrictions on writing about divorce due to contempt law that prohibits publication of the details of any matter before the Family Court of Australia. For this reason, in the memoir element of *Mrs L*, the transcript of the brief court appearance between myself and my daughter’s father was not disclosed, despite his participation in the memoir itself. There were no custodial decisions directed by the Court, nor any directions for maintenance.

Moving to wider ethical considerations, the interviewing of others and construction of facts into a form of journalism, particularly literary journalism and its use of fictional techniques, has had wide ethical discussion (Greenberg, 2014; Kramer, 1995; Malcolm, 1990). *Mrs L* was further subject to University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Creative works that form doctoral creative arts awards are notorious for challenging university ethics processes, as discussed by Barbara Bolt, Kate MacNeill and Pia Ednie-Brown (2014) who analysed the impact of the ethics process on art making versus the concept of the ‘aesthetic alibi’ (p. 80). They explain that the aesthetic alibi:

has long recognised avant-garde art practices and artists as a case apart, leading to the concern that the ethics process may have the effect of limiting avant-gardism on the part of students (2014, p.80).

While *Mrs L* is a work of literary journalism, not avant-garde art making, the core of the aesthetic alibi is in tune with creative experimentation within the limits of literary journalism’s emphasis on fact and legal restrictions. The aesthetic alibi marries with Susan Greenberg’s acknowledgement of literary journalism as aesthetic: ‘It is the dramatisation of actions and their consequences that distinguishes narrative prose from expository writing and gives it aesthetic beauty’ (2014, p. 517).

HREC was appropriately stringent in regard to my daughter Ruby who was aged 12–16 during the writing of the work. In discussions with HREC it was agreed her voice should be heard in *Mrs L*, but this agreement was conditional on any interview with her being conducted by a third party trusted by her and that she had access to a psychologist. This agreement was weighted with the acknowledgement that children of single parents are more vulnerable (Wallerstein and Kelly, 2008) and teens are unlikely to fully consider participant information forms and longer term ramifications.

As the HREC process highlighted, the core of the ethics of memoir is the sharing of memories. What is memoir to you is private to others who experienced the same event. Paul John Eakin notes: ‘Because we live our lives in relation to others, our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate the boundary where one life leaves off and another begins’ (2004, p. 8). This was particularly sensitive in regards to both my daughter and her father, and, as a result, there was an element of self-silencing (Miller, 2004) in regards to memories that I felt may impact on my ex-husband’s current life or embarrass our daughter. But self-silencing raises questions of authenticity of the memoir itself. After much thought, I decided these omitted memories would not remove the authenticity of the story’s core truths. Other shared memories were also tested in

interviews with my daughter, my ex-husband, his sister and a former colleague in line with university ethical clearance of interviews. The question 'What do you remember?' was integral to the ethical appropriation of shared memories. As Larson notes, the writer is required to 'show himself remembering' (2007, p. 61).

Echoing the need for empathy in literary journalism and memoir (Conover, 2016; Gornick, 2001) Claudia Mills argues empathy is key to the ethics of writing shared memories: 'the best but hardest way to reduce these costs is simply to be a great writer, with a wise, compassionate view of your characters in all their enormous complexity' (2004, p. 114). Yet the fictionalising of memoir is legally and ethically an issue due to those cloaked identities potentially claiming that they can be still identified regardless of the fictionalisation – in Australian defamation law, only three people need to recognise the fictionalised or deidentified person for a person to claim defamation.

Perhaps then as McDonald reflected, memoir is looking rather hard, but a memoir with fiction is perhaps harder still. Instead whether writing a memoir or an auto / biography hybrid such as *Mrs L*, it is important to sit with the discomfort, to be ethical in the way shared memories are written, to not self-silence at the expense of the authentic narrative core, and to delve into the cultural self and illuminate voices that need to be heard.

Chapter 1: Literary Journalism and Biography

The connection between literary journalism and biography as non-fiction practices are historically intertwined with Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1994 [1791]) and Daniel Defoe's account of a highway man, *The True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathon Wild* (1725), regarded as early examples of literary journalism that are also biographies (Kerrane & Yagoda, 1997). The connection is underlined by biography scholars Han Renders and Binn De Haan who note:

Journalism is undervalued as a contributor to thought concerning biographical practices...journalistic literature which made dramatic advances in the 1930s, can also be considered one of the important influences on present day biography. (2013, p. 22)

A biography that is written in literary journalism style arguably fulfils what Virginia Woolf called for in her essay 'New Biography' (1958 [1927]) and reiterated in her later essay 'The Art of Biography' (1967 [1942]), published posthumously: that narrative qualities are essential in the practice of biographic writing. Woolf reflected:

Could not biography produce something of the intensity of poetry, something of the excitement of drama and yet keep also the peculiar virtue that belongs to fact – its suggestive reality, its own proper creativeness? (1967 [1942], p. 224)

In the context of biography, this chapter discusses the poetics of literary journalism as defined by Norman Sims (2012): the author's active presence, narrative techniques such as symbolism, complicated structures and character development, immersion, a focus on ordinary people, and accuracy. It will explore these characteristics via an analysis of two contemporary biographies, Janet Malcolm's *Two Lives* (2007), about Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas in wartime France, and the literary journalism component of this thesis, *Mrs L*.

The history of biography and literary journalism

Biography is not automatically regarded as literary journalism despite the prominence of the profile in literary journalism scholarship and practice, as articulated by Matthew Ricketson (2004, 2016) and Willa McDonald (2016). Sue Joseph and Richard Lance Keeble note too that biography and profiles remain related:

They [the profile] are but one part of the 'human interest bias' that percolates through the whole culture – taking in television and talk shows, documentaries, biographies and autobiographies in the publishing industry... (2016, p. 1)

To fully see the relationship between literary journalism and biography it is useful to explore their history in more depth. Biography is traced back to Plutarch and Suetonius, the latter writing about Julius Caesar with a more populist eye; Thucydides' account of Pericles; and Tacitus' portrait of Tiberius that was 'complete and finely wrought' (Kendall, 1965, p. 33). Joseph and Keeble extrapolate, 'the media profile can also be seen to emerge from the biographic / autobiographical tradition started by Plutarch' (2016, p. 3).

The intersection of literary journalism and biography begins with Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson (1994 [1791]). Grant Hannis writes that 'many elements of *The Life* anticipate modern journalistic

practice' (2016, p. 25). Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda agree:

Boswell's masterwork also anticipated what Tom Wolfe in his essay 'The New Journalism' called scene by scene construction...the biography proceeds largely through set theatrical pieces, with copious dialogue and Wolfen 'status details'. (1998, p. 29)

Kerrane and Yagoda place an earlier example than Boswell with Defoe's *Jonathan Wild* (1725) which can be read as Defoe experimenting with 'criminal biography' (Pepper, 2011, p. 473). By the Victorian era, Mark Twain and Australian literary journalists (McDonald, 2015) were writing works of literary journalism that were, if not biographies, at least identifiable as profiles. Twain chronicled the survival of two shipwrecked brothers for *Harper's New Monthly* in 1866 (Zmijewski, 1999) and J.D Melvin and Thomas Carrington immortalised Ned Kelly with their evocative descriptions of his life and capture in 1880 (McDonald & Davies, 2015). But in 1927, Woolf lamented that biography had lost the narrative qualities pioneered by Boswell due to censorship by families who encouraged sanitised and glorified narratives. Woolf argues:

The Victorian biography was a parti-coloured, monstrous birth. For though truth of fact was observed as scrupulously as Boswell observed it the personality which Boswell's genius set free was hampered and distorted...

The Victorian biographer was dominated with the idea of goodness. Noble, upright, chaste, severe; it is thus that Victorian worthies are presented to us. (1958 [1927], p. 151)

Woolf's argument for a return to the style of Boswell was a predictive call for biography to be written with a methodology drawn from literary journalism. More recently, Ira Nadel (1984) cites Boswell's work as an example of the 'dramatic / expressive' form of biography (1984, p. 170), a reading that tightens the relationship between literary journalism and biography since literary journalism also emphasises the dramatic and expressive whilst, like biography, is constrained by facts.

Literary journalism and biography: characteristics

Although not referring specifically to literary journalism, Nigel Hamilton sees experimentation of narrative form in biography as the 'radical reorientation of the biographer as author' (2016, p. 17) who is more subjective, innovative and questioning in their approach to their subject, which marries with the poetics of literary journalism. Therefore, it is possible to identify biographies that do fit the form of literary journalism by following Norman Sims' (2012) instructive characteristics:

Typically, literary journalism involves immersion reporting for a year or longer, the active presence of the author in the narrative and tools long associated only with fiction such as elaborate structures, characterisation and even symbolism, but with the added requirement of accuracy. (p. 33)

The active presence of the author – voice – is not necessarily expressed by the use of first person in literary journalism, but given this exegesis' emphasis on auto / biography, this element will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter about the cultural self, and also in the final chapter on epistolary strategy and literary journalism. Broadly, the characteristic of voice is summed up by author Ted Conover who recites the Spanish phrase: 'Cada Cabeza es un mundo: Every mind is a universe' (2016, p. 9). Another literary journalism scholar, Stephen Pyne, invokes the reader by noting a voice is mentally read and heard:

It [voice] explains who is talking, and to whom...Crudely put, voice describes how a text sounds to the reader...voice provides for the reader a prism of tone and nuance – a literary context – by which to interpret the text. (2009, pp. 37-40)

John Durham Peters argues that voice is broadly a 'metaphor of power' (2004, p. 85) that is paralinguistic as much as communicative (1999) and, while he was referring to voice in an auditory context, his idea of voice as paralinguistic is relevant to literary journalism. Literary journalists create voice not only through dialogue from recorded interviews and conversations but also recording paralinguistic elements such as expression revealing emotion and character.

Accuracy

Sims' characteristic of accuracy is straightforward on the surface. Literary journalism and biography share ethical challenges of responsibility to sources, a legal framework and factual restrictions. With this in mind, Hermione Lee (2009, p. 6) states the first rule of biography is that the story should be true, whatever its approach. And as much as she longed to see narrative power in biography, Virginia Woolf cautioned:

It [biography] imposes conditions, and those conditions are that it must be based on fact. And by fact in biography we mean facts that can be verified by other people besides the artist (1947, p. 123).

She celebrated Boswell for his commitment to verification whilst still being a master of narrative:

Boswell's astonishing power over us is based largely on his obstinate veracity, so that we have implicit belief in what he tells us...we are in a world of brick and pavement, of birth, marriage, and death; of Acts of Parliament; of Pitt and Burke and Sir Joshua Reynolds. (1958 [1927], p. 155)

More recently, Kramer reflected that literary journalists can treat truth as narrative but must 'keep things square'. He lists the following 'rules':

no composite scenes, no mis-stated chronology, no falsification of the discernable drift of proportion of events, no invention of quotes, no attribution of thoughts to sources unless the sources have said they've had those very thoughts and no unacknowledged deals with subjects involving payment or editorial control. (1995, p. 25)

Yet it seems a paradox when 'fact' and 'truth' are discussed in the context of fictional techniques to write a non-fiction work. Woolf articulated the fallible tension between truth and art when she discussed Harold Nicolson's biographic / fiction hybrid experiment, *Some People* (1982 [1927]). Woolf admired its narrative qualities and characterisation but also recognised Nicolson pushed the boundaries of truth. She concludes that 'Mr. Nicolson has proved that one can use many of the devices of fiction in dealing with real life' (1958 [1927], p. 154). But she added, due to his foray into fictional detail, 'Mr. Nicolson makes us feel, in short, that he is playing with very dangerous elements' (p. 154).

Australian author Helen Garner's work of literary journalism, *The First Stone* (1995), played on such dangerous elements in her account of Victorian students' charges of sexual assault against a College master, and the book remains the most controversial of Garner's non-fiction. Willa McDonald notes that while Garner's writing style is acclaimed, she is equally criticised 'for the way she utilises fictional techniques in the portrayal of factual situations, concentrates in her work on the subjectivity of the narrator and consequently,

displays her personal politics' (2011, p. 260). McDonald proposes that:

Her [Garner's] work has provoked censure when it has refused to follow traditional journalistic conventions; chosen not to establish a clear contract of intention of with its readership; privileged the exploration of the writer's emotions over intellectual frameworks; and challenged traditional notions of subjectivity and objectivity. (2011, p. 260)

According to McDonald, *The First Stone* 'breached journalistic conventions with Garner adding a fictional element to non-fictional text' (p. 261) and 'splitting one person into six characters...creating an impression of a conspiracy of academic feminists working to block Garner's search for the truth' (p. 264).

As both a literary journalist and a biographer, Malcolm acknowledges the fallible tension between accuracy and narrative. Reflecting on why non-fiction writers 'can't conduct their own modernist experiments' (1990, p. 153) like fiction writers, Malcolm writes:

The answer is because the writer of fiction is entitled to more privileges. He is master of his own house and he may do what he likes in it; he may even tear it down if he is so inclined. But the writer of nonfiction is only a renter, who must abide by the conditions of his lease, which stipulates he has to leave the house – and its name is actuality – as he found it. He may bring in his own furniture and arrange it as he likes (the so-called New Journalism is about the arrangement of furniture) and he may play his radio quietly. But he must not disturb the house's fundamental structure or tamper with any of its architectural features. The writer of nonfiction is under contract to the reader to limit himself to events that actually occurred. (1990, p. 153)

In *Two Lives*, Malcolm draws on extensive sources, bringing in her own furniture: her voice and stylistic techniques. She further draws upon *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Stein, 1933) in which Stein shrouds her own story as Toklas'; Stein's war memoir, *Wars I Have Seen* (1945); Toklas' memoir / recipe book *The Alice B Toklas Cookbook* (1954) and other sources such as Nazi collaborator and Stein's friend, Bernard Fay's memoir *Les Precieux* (1966). Malcolm includes her fact-checking in the narrative, such as when she attempts to confirm that Toklas helped finance Fay's escape from prison in 1951 through the sale of a work on paper by Picasso.

Similarly, *Mrs L* draws on Bertha Lawson's memoirs (1931, 1943), manuscripts, letters, and legal documents, for example, the affidavit Bertha Lawson lodged with the divorce court in 1903. The affidavit works as a narrative device to begin the story but also provides documentary proof of Bertha's allegations of Henry's violence.

As Malcolm suggests, literary journalists writing biographies can experiment with the furniture but not disturb the structure in their house of actuality. The house of non-fiction metaphor works in regards to the characters present in the house, particularly in the auto / biography that is *Mrs L* and *Two Lives*. Rather than one person as the focus and the biographer as invisible and objective, auto / biographies invite more people into the house, including themselves as subjective, present characters.

Character

Literary journalism and biography are propelled by character as well as narrative. Mark Kramer cites Henry James' term 'felt life' – 'the frank, unidealised level that includes individual difference, frailty, tenderness,

nastiness, vanity, generosity, pomposity, humility, all in proper proportion' (1995, p. 23). He adds that, 'It [literary journalism] leaves quirks and self-deceptions, hypocrisies, and graces intact and exposed; in fact, it uses them to deepen understanding' (p. 23).

In her critique of Alice B. Toklas and Stein in occupied France, Malcolm is rejecting the 'dominance of the idea of goodness' in biographies in which Woolf argues a biography is sanitised as to meet standards of Victorian morality and uphold public regard (1958 [1927], p. 151). Malcolm interrogates the complex relationship between Stein and Nazi collaborator Bernard Fay, who protected the Jewish couple. As warnings to leave France for Switzerland or return home to the USA became more urgent, Malcolm writes that Stein's 'refusal to budge in the face of such a warning is at once incredible and completely in character' (p. 27).

A similar rejection occurs in *Mrs L*. Henry Lawson is seen through the lens of a separated husband and father who is unreliable and probably violent, Bertha is not angelicised in the narrative (or the intention is for her not to be) and her volatility is noted by their daughter (1968, n/p). An additional character is the poet Mary Gilmore, Henry Lawson's friend and defender who is a counterpoint character to Bertha, blaming her for all Henry Lawson's woes in the tradition of his biographers (Roderick, 1982, 1991; Clark, 1978), in her unpublished memoir of Henry and Bertha Lawson (1922). Like Malcolm's depiction of Stein and Toklas in *Two Lives*, *Mrs L* aims to not idealise its characters, showing their frailty, tenderness, nastiness, vanity, self-deceptions and graces.

Elaborate Structures

With characters in place, the literary journalism technique of elaborate structures manifests in biographies that shift in time rather than maintaining chronology. Like a novelist, the literary journalist writing a biography is likely to choose the most compelling opening, rather than a chronological one, as do biographers who resist the birth to death arc. Investigative journalist and biographer, Steve Weinberg, acknowledges: 'The most sensible place to depart from chronology, if at all, is in the opening chapter' (Weinberg, 1992, p. 20). Marr (2016-2017) doesn't so much argue against chronological maneuvering in the narrative but instead objects to the inclusion of the author revisiting place in the biography. He does not recognise the 'emotional profluence' of revisiting place (Larson, 2007, p. 76) and critiques the resulting dual narrative that 'mucks around with time' (2016-2017, p. 66). The revisiting of place will be discussed later in this chapter as it relates to immersion.

Hermione Lee also implies that biographies have complicated structures. While not discussing the relationship of literary journalism and biography, Lee notes that 'if covering the 'whole life' implies that biography should proceed chronologically from cradle to grave, then this rule has been so often broken as not to count' (2009, p. 8). Malcolm's *Two Lives* and *Mrs L* are among that count and, no doubt to Marr's annoyance, muck around with time by including the author in contemporary time as well as historical settings.

In *Mrs L*, the chronology begins with Bertha Lawson's affidavit to the divorce court in 1903. Although it then flashes back to the beginning of their relationship, the narrative remains focused on their marriage and ensuing separation with time jumps to the present. Similarly, *Two Lives* focuses on the relationship of Stein and Toklas during the war and switches between present and past time rather than following a chronological arc.

While Malcolm does detail Stein's life pre-Toklas, it is dealt with relatively briefly. Malcolm describes Stein's 'youngest child confidence' (2007, p. 31), her literary competitiveness with her brother Leo, and Stein's self-reflection that she 'had cajoling ways' (p. 29) growing up. This background shows Stein's persuasive, ambitious personality that encouraged Toklas to acquiesce to her every wish. Toklas 'managed the practical details of Stein's life almost to the point of parody' (p. 28). Malcolm does discuss Toklas' background, but only in the context of her relationship with Stein.

Focusing on this one period allows Malcolm to fully explore Stein and Toklas' relationship during World War Two. Likewise, while much has been written about Henry Lawson as birth to death chronological biographies, with Bertha as a sideshow, focusing on the breakdown of the marriage and post separation single parenting allows Bertha to be the central character rather than Henry. She is no longer a side show.

Symbolism in the form of motifs also becomes important in the complicated structure. Motifs are a narrative device which also represent a shift in time in *Mrs L* and *Two Lives*. Toklas' *Cookbook* (1954) is both a link between Malcolm today and Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas in occupied France, and also a symbol of the couple's disturbing domesticity as the holocaust literally surrounded them. Likewise in *Mrs L*, Henry Lawson's statue physically and symbolically shows the static nature of the masculine hero of Australian literary mateship and culture which *Mrs L* constantly challenges.

The question of immersion

While some of literary journalism's characteristics are a seamless fit in regard to writing biography, immersion is somewhat problematic. The first challenge is the implication that immersion requires the physical presence of the literary journalist as biographer in the research process, either observing as a 'fly on the wall' or incorporating a more overt participatory first person approach. Ted Conover contradicts Sims' view that immersion has to be for a year, arguing it can be only hours:

The point is that by simply spending time with people, being at their side as they encounter challenging situations – by hanging out in other words – you learn a lot more about them than you might by only conducting interviews. (2016, p. 11)

While a biographer writing about a contemporary subject can use the immersion method, particularly if they have access to the subject, the literary journalist who is dealing with historical distance – such as in *Mrs L* and *Two Lives* (Malcolm, 2007) – is limited. You can't 'hang out' with someone who died 100 years ago, or in Bertha Lawson's case over a half century ago. You can, however, revisit place. Arguably this is an effective immersive process and assists with the narrative time jumps that occur in both *Mrs L* and *Two Lives*. Revisiting of place further leads to what Larson, referencing Gardner (1991), describes as 'emotionally profluent' (2007, p. 76), meaning that as the narrative climbs to its summit, so does our emotional understanding. In *Mrs L*, the emotional profluence occurs during the revisiting of places such as: the Imperial War Museum, formerly Bethlem Royal Hospital where Bertha was hospitalised for what now would be diagnosed as severe postnatal depression; the Lawsons' London and Sydney homes; and the National Art School, formerly Darlinghurst Gaol, where Henry was imprisoned.

Robin Hemley describes such visiting of place as 'the re-enactment' (2012, p. 20). Such revisiting, however, doesn't have to be a re-enactment of lived experience as Hemley does by returning to his childhood summer holiday camp; it can be a participatory experience as exemplified by visiting historical sites in *Mrs L*. A revisit can also be symbolic; Hemley lists *Julia and Julia* (Powell, 2005), the memoir of cooking daily from the Julia Child cookbook *Mastering the Act of French Cooking No. 1* as a re-enactment.

Revisiting of place can be doubly reflexive as it is both a contemporary immersive experience but can also ignite recollections, for example returning to a childhood home as Sylvester Monroe does in *Brothers: Black and Poor* (1989). His returning to a known place is an immersive practice that has two tenets: the first is highlighting the social and political context of the narrative, thus emphasising the cultural self (Larson, 2007) that will be discussed in the following chapter, and invoking Virginia Woolf's 'I now, I then' (Woolf, 1939, p. 75).

Conclusion

When Virginia Woolf (1958 [1927]) called for innovative practice, for truth and art to co-exist, and for the fully formed, flawed character to be told, arguably she was calling for the poetics of literary journalism to inform the writing of biography. Her collection of essays *Granite & Rainbow* (1958) published after her death by editor and husband Leonard Woolf, encompasses essays on fiction and biography, including 'The New Biography'. In this essay, Woolf writes:

If we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld the two into one seamless whole, we shall admit the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (p. 149)

Woolf's granite-like hard fact of biography is also the accuracy required by literary journalism. Her intangibility of the rainbow of personality are the poetics of voice, character and elaborate structures arcing over those facts in biography too. Immersion can be part of this rainbow of literary journalism in a biography, either as a contemporary immersion with the subject or a revisiting of historical place as shown by *Mrs L*.

With literary journalism's relationship to biography established, the following chapter will extend discussion of the a / b genre and the active author by focusing on the complicated structures and voice present in biographies that contain a 'cultural self' (Calvillo, 2003, p. 51).

Chapter 2: Memoir, the Cultural Self and the auto / biography (a / b) Genre

In a large Sydney bookstore, Stan Grant's memoir *Talking to My Country* (2016) is out of stock but according to the bookstore's information desk it is usually found in the 'Indigenous Culture and South Pacific' section. This anecdotal bookshop excursion underlines Thomas Larson's (2007) argument that a memoirist is writing as much about their cultural experience as about themselves.

Echoing Paul Eakin (1992), Larson emphasises that memoir is a 'relational form' (2007, p. 23) in that a life experience encompasses other people, institutions, and social and political forces. He argues: 'in memoir, how we have lived with ourselves teeter-totters how we have lived with others – not only people but cultures, ideas, politics, religions, history, and more' (2007, p. 22). He further observes: 'What is faced and lost is crucial. Only by lingering on something outside the self, with which he has had intimate experience, can the author disclose himself' (pp. 22-23).

Eakin and Larson's view of memoir challenges the critique of memoirs as reflecting our culture of individualism (Rak, 2014), foisted upon a suffering public by authors whose lives aren't that unique (Genzlinger, 2011). In regard to the auto / biography genre, the use of first person in biography has also been recently critiqued by David Marr (2016-2017) as being akin to a playwright clambering on the stage (p. 66).

This chapter argues that the self is a meaningful character that strengthens the narrative rather than distracts in auto / biography works, as exemplified by *Mrs L* and Janet Malcolm's *Two Lives* (2007). As stated in the introduction, I will be using the term 'cultural self' to distinguish from the biographic content. As well as being informed by Eakin and Larson, the term 'cultural self' is borrowed from interdisciplinary studies of the self and culture (Calvillo, 2003; DeMunck, 2000; Schaubert, 2002) that will be discussed later in this chapter.

To extend Marr's playwright metaphor, the self within a biography has a place on stage as it illuminates social and political discourse that can be a 'socio political weapon' (Bak, 2011, p. 6) of literary journalism. In doing so, the self illuminates voices that have been absent in biographic narratives, such as Bertha Lawson was in the biographies of Henry Lawson.

Before proceeding further, I note that I am using the term memoir rather than autobiography. Ben Yagoda writes that memoir has a history that reaches back to Caesar's *Commentaries* in 50 BC, Augustine's *Confessions* in the 5th century, religious memoirs by 12th century monks, and Norfolk housewife's Margery Kempe's account of her visions in the 15th century (2009, p. 32)

Yagoda sees memoir and autobiography as largely interchangeable but distinctions are argued by others (Lejeune, 1989; Smith and Watson, 2001). Phillipe Lejeune distinguishes that the autobiography concerns the individual life, while the memoir is more about a personality and a time. He further defines the autobiographical pact as the notion of:

the contract between author and reader in which autobiographers explicitly commit themselves not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and understand their own lives (Lejeune, 1989 cited in Eakin, 1992, p. 24).

Devika Chawla however includes memoir in Lejeune's autobiographical pact, arguing that the pact is 'between the memoirist who writes herself into being and the reader who reads her 'selves' in association with the writer' (2008, p. 377).

In her analysis of *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Didion, 2005), Chawla also suggests that memoir is external. In writing about the universal experience of grief, Didion becomes 'a conduit between the public and private experience of death' (2008, p. 380).

Chawla further draws on James Olney's (1980) view of autobiography:

Didion's grief is a shared grief, perhaps temporally distanced from many, but it is? shared by human beings from the past and readers of the moment. This sharing accomplishes a key objective of autobiography as being the story of a distinct culture (in this case grief) written in individual characters and from within. (2008, p. 383)

Discussing the significance of the self and culture's relationship in memoir, Larson poses the question 'Can a memoir, a personal document, stand for what groups of people endure?' (2007, p. 179). Arguably yes. Grant's exploration of the Wiradjuri people – his ancestry – captures the wider marginalisation of Indigenous Australians since colonisation. Grant details his itinerant childhood as his parents moved from town to town, his acute awareness of racism and the associated paternalistic welfare system that shadowed his parents' loving care and subjected Grant and other indigenous children to humiliating public lice and fingernail checks. Grant revisits his country's lands in New South Wales with his son, researches his Wiradjuri ancestry and highlights the guerrilla warfare as the Wiradjuri people defended their land against encroaching and destructive colonisation.

He writes that his white grandmother chose to live on the margins with his Wiradjuri grandfather and that he read a white history of Australia at school that eroded Aboriginal history:

Now, I was a confused young boy at school, ashamed of what I was. I would cringe against the black and white ethnographic films: the snot smeared faces of the little 'piccaninnies', the fly blown women grinding seed into flour, the bedraggled, bearded men gripping a spear, one leg resting against a knee. I remember there was always a narrator with perfectly rounded vowels telling of the 'once proud tribe of Aborigines'. Each head turned to look at me and I felt anything but pride. I saw my reflection in Australia and felt diminished. (2016, p. 33)

Grant's memoir echoes Margo Jefferson's *Negroland: A Memoir* (2015) that interweaves her privileged upbringing in Chicago with US race relations. Jefferson recalls that she was continually warned their position was fragile as her family challenged white privilege. As Grant does, Jefferson places herself in a discourse of race relations and in doing so achieves her self-stated aim of memoir – examining herself while 'paying attention to the larger historical and spiritual forces that have made us' (Jefferson cited in Larson, 2007, p. 182).

Larson further argues that the relationship between culture and self is intergenerational, which is relevant to *Mrs L* and *Two Lives*. *Mrs L* has a distance of over a century, while Malcolm is looking back decades to World War Two. Stan Grant also exemplifies this intergenerational relationship by reaching from colonial Australia to his own recent family history.

The self and biography

David Marr recently questioned the use of first person in biography in his 2016 Seymour Biography Lecture at the National Library of Australia, in which he called a / b biographies 'quests'. An edited version of the lecture subsequently appeared in *The Monthly* (Marr, 2016-2017) as 'The Art of Biography' that references Virginia Woolf's posthumously published essay (1967 [1942]) of the same name. It is interesting to reflect upon whether Virginia Woolf would appreciate the referencing to her work given she was calling for biographical experimentation.

Marr, the author of *Patrick White: A Life* (1991) and *Quarterly* biographic essays on Kevin Rudd (2010), George Pell (2013), and Tony Abbott (2012), that he dismisses as 'little lives' (2016-2017, p. 68) but they are also biographic works of literary journalism that average 160 pages. Marr argues, 'kind writers save their readers from their homework' (2016-2017, p. 66) and 'playwrights don't wander onstage. Directors are never in shot' (p. 65). His personal rule for biographies is that 'biographers should stay out of sight' (p. 65).

Marr criticises such quest biographies as a publishing trend that shifts the focus from the subject to the biographer. He further argues:

I blame the new template on television. The model is David Attenborough in the jungle, Brian Cox on the edge of the universe and Bob Hughes among the cubists. They are miraculously good at their task – eloquent, personal guides on the complexities of the universe. They are men on a quest. They give abstract subjects a human face. But lives aren't abstract. Biography is an act of re-creation. (p. 66)

Investigative journalist and biographer Steve Weinberg (1992) suggests that in using first person and especially subjective hindsight in a biography, 'the biographer is arrogantly pluming himself on a prescience that has no more merit than the good luck of being born later than his subject' (p. 22). Writing about Ian Hamilton's biography of J.D Salinger (1988) Mark Silverberg comments on Hamilton's presence in the text: '*In Search of J.D Salinger* foregrounds the biographer's voice while its subject lurks in the sub textual shadows' (2011, p. 3). Silverberg further argues: 'As Allen Hibbard notes in *Biographer and Subject* (2006), such authorial intrusion has been received rather negatively in a genre putatively defined by objective reportage and scholarly detail' (p. 26).

In his argument against first person in biography, Marr's main objection is its intrusiveness. He recalls witnessing his biography subject, Patrick White, in a medical emergency at home during his immersion with the writer. Marr observes:

These days, my editor would be urging me to put myself at the foot of the stairs as that terrified bundle was carried down to the ambulance. They would want me to weave into Patrick's life the story of me chasing after him around the world with vignettes of people I met and places I visited. Don't get me wrong. They are good stories, and I have told them often *after* publication. (2017, p. 66)

But Marr makes an exception for first person in *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1994 [1791]) because of the biographer Boswell's long association with Samuel Johnson that transformed his 'I' [Boswell] into a character that contributes to rather than distracts from the narrative. According to Marr, Boswell is one of the few biographers who have earned the right to appear on stage (p. 68). Even then, he warns, there is the risk of being 'marked down as a show off' (p. 68). As well as opening the discussion of when the first person is

effective and appropriate in biographies, Marr's highlighting of Boswell's voice in Samuel Johnson also suggests that it is an early example of both literary journalism and the auto / biography genre.

Marr also makes the odd exception for his own practice of writing biographies. He acknowledges he has broken his stay out of sight rule... 'once or twice when it seemed necessary' (p. 65). One of those times is in his biography of Kevin Rudd, *Power Trip* (2010), in the ironically named chapter 'Facetime'. Marr details a conversation with Rudd: 'Almost as he is leaving the table he asks me the argument of this essay. It's a man-to-man question, so I tell him. I'm pursuing the contradictions of his life' (p. 85). Marr continues:

I don't notice his face changing at first but by the time I finish giving this bare-bones account I realise Rudd is furious. I have hurt him and he is angry. What follows is a dressing down which registers about a 3.8 on his Richter scale. He doesn't scream and bang the table as he does behind closed doors. We're in the open. The voice is low. He is perfectly composed. ...At last he is speaking from the heart, an angry heart. (p. 86)

At the National Library of Australia Seymour Biography lecture Marr told the audience that writing about Rudd was one of the few times he had to include himself to capture the power of the scene:

There was no way of keeping myself out of the denouement of that *Quarterly Essay*... At last he was speaking from the heart, an angry heart and I had to be on the page to pull that off. (2016, n/p)

Reflecting on Marr's practice raises the question: can the biographer really stay out of sight when they are writing a character-driven narrative as Marr does? When his reputation as a biographer (and literary journalist) suggests that his presence in the text remains via his authorial voice, despite his argument otherwise? Hermione Lee (2009) argues that biographical debates around objectivity have always been in question as biography experimented with subjective practices. Taking a postmodern approach, Lee argues: 'We write from a certain position constructed by our history, nationality, race, gender, class, education, beliefs. More specifically there is likely to be some shared experience between writer and subject' (p. 12). She reflects that the motives underlying a biographical choice of subject are always subjective. 'The driving energy for the book may come from loathing or fear, a need to understand a monstrous act, a revisionary desire to set the record straight' (p. 12).

I suggest that the biographer staying in sight is more transparent than the biographer who stays in the shadows yet imbues their work with interpretation and characterisation as Clark (1978) and Roderick (1982, 1991) do when writing about Bertha Lawson. Indeed, biography theory's recognition of the auto / biography genre is both a reflection of changing biographical practices and recognising autobiography is inscribed into the biographer's work (Caine, 2010). The auto / biography genre invites Sim's 'active presence of the author in the narrative' (2012, p. 33) and as such is a literary journalism poetic that challenges objective news reporting style that requires a neutral voice (Bak, 2012, p. 2). The active presence of the author is a highly visible characteristic of *Two Lives* and *Mrs L* as both have a first person present narrator that is adjunct to the main biographical narrative.

In biography, such active presence of the author is a 'tricky matter', argues Allen Hibbard:

Just how much can or should authors assert their presence? The enterprise of writing biography necessarily involves two distinct, yet related strands: the story of the subject and the story of the biographer coming to know, structure and recreate the

life of the subject. Through the process, the relationship between biographer and subject becomes particularly tight, producing intense identification, admiration, disgust, or aspects of all of these and other emotions. (2006, p. 19)

I argue that the success of this assertion of presence hinges on the presence of the cultural self.

The Cultural Self and the a / b genre

Invoking the cultural self in the writing of biography aligns with literary journalism's commitment to narratives with social and political themes. The cultural self deepens the 'I' beyond what Marr sees as merely an 'I was there' device that detracts from the biography at hand (2016-2017, p. 66). The present narrator can clearly look at the political and social contexts that often explain choices made by the individuals they are writing about. *Two Lives* examines Stein and Toklas during the occupation of France, and interrogates their survival when so many perished. Malcolm bluntly asks: 'How had the pair of elderly Jewish lesbians escaped the Nazis?' In *Mrs L*, it is Australian women's experience of single parenting and divorce. The social and political implications of these questions can be constructed as the slash between the auto – the present narrator's story – and the biography.

Malcolm has effectively and transparently invoked the cultural self in her biography of Stein and Toklas even though she did not disclose her own Jewish ancestry as a daughter of parents fleeing the Holocaust (Hughes, 2007). A half-century after her first reading in the fifties of *The Cook Book* (Toklas, 1954). Malcolm returns to this text with the perspective of the Holocaust. Her historical perspective gives her the subjective framework in which to examine Stein and Toklas' survival when their Jewish and lesbian contemporaries were being persecuted, and for her own cultural self, her innocence in the postwar period as an idealistic student who didn't realise Toklas' 'evasions' (2007, p. 7). Malcolm's cultural self invites Virginia Woolf's idea of 'I now, I then' in her unfinished memoir, *A Sketch of the Past* published posthumously in the essays *Moments of Being* (1976). It is essentially a meta memoir in that Woolf both recalls the past and reflects upon writing about the past. Larson queries the meaning of Woolf's 'I now, I then':

Is Woolf suggesting that what we remember about ourselves can be – perhaps should be – influenced or changed by present circumstances? Is she suggesting that depending on the degree of unsettlement, the past can mislead the present as much as the present misleads the past? (2007, p. 31)

Malcolm reflects upon Toklas' *Cook Book* chapter 'Food in the Bugey' and recognises her naivety and assumptions of first reading it, compared to her re-reading after her research into their lives during occupied France:

...Then it went without saying that the people Stein and Toklas saw during the war were the good guys. But today I know at least one who came to see Stein and Toklas at Culoz was not a good guy – indeed he was one of the very worst guys, convicted of collaboration after the war and sentenced to a lifetime of hard labor. (p. 6)

Malcolm is referring to Bernard Fay, who became head of the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris in the 1940s. Free in her present narrator voice, Malcolm openly questions how much Stein and Toklas knew about his collaboration with the Nazis, which is a core question the book seeks to answer. Nodding to the aforementioned intergenerational distance (Larson, 2007) that can inform the cultural self, Malcolm contends that it would have been difficult to write such a scrutiny of Stein and Toklas in the postwar period as there was

still yet to be as open a discussion of the Holocaust and sexuality as there is today:

Well, in the fifties one did not go out of one's way to mention one's Jewishness. Gentlemanly anti-Semitism was still a fact of American life. The fate of Europe's Jews was known but the magnitude of the catastrophe had not registered; the term: 'Holocaust' was not yet in use...In 1954 Toklas' evasions went as unremarked as her recipes for A Restricted Veal Loaf and Swimming Crawfish went uncooked. Today the evasions seem egregious though hardly incomprehensible. Stein and Toklas' war makes it easy to see why the complex actuality of their situation and conduct found no place in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*. (2007, p. 7)

In *Mrs L*, the intergenerational perspective allows the social and political context to extend throughout the century and reflect upon the contemporary experience of single parenting and Bertha's experience in the early 1900s. It shows that little has changed in the relations between separated couples and the difficulties of raising a child alone.

Illumination of voice and the cultural self

Finally, I would like to discuss how the cultural self can contribute to illuminating voice. Vivian Gornick describes personal narrative voice as 'the persona is the instrument of illumination' (2001, p. 7), emphasising how a narrative persona can illuminate absent voices. Robyn Fivush argues that voice can be silent or is silenced; she writes, 'silence occurs at the cultural level for experiences that do not fit the culturally dominant narrative' (2010, p. 91) and she terms narratives from silenced people 'resistance narratives' which are often shared stories. Fivush's views about silenced voices in the culturally dominant narrative is especially relevant to Grant's memoir and in the auto / biography genre, *Mrs L*.

Grant writes that he was born into what W.E.H Stanner (1968) called, 'the Great Australian silence' (2016, p. 29) and illuminates the silenced voice of his family through his first person perspective of his own history. Grant reaches beyond his memory further into Wiradjuri history and in doing so he illuminates the voices of silenced people such as his father and leaders of the Wiradjuri resistance to encroaching colonisation. Grant does this by directly quoting his mother Betty Cameron's telling song:

She was one of those pale faces that tempted the authorities eager to imagine they could turn black kids into white:
The welfare's in town
The welfare's in town
How fast the word gets around
...that just won't do, we hear them say.
Maybe we'll send the kids away.
She turned the world of her childhood into verse. She passed these stories on to me, her son. My mother's poems tell of pain and pride, of joy and just getting by. But her poems also served as a warning to me. (p. 98)

Drawing on his cultural self, Grant's voice is lyrical and intimate, illuminating both his own experience and the silent voices of Wiradjuri men and women who were persecuted and marginalised since colonisation. His cultural self melds past stories and present feelings, so invoking Woolf's 'I then, I now' both as an individual and also a wider socio-political landscape of race relations. He acknowledges an angrier voice that slipped into a baffling sadness then a rediscovered pride.

In *Mrs L* – an a / b genre text - the cultural self both strengthens the voice of the 'I' but also illuminates

Bertha's absent voice more clearly by articulating the socio-political forces that framed her 1903 separation from Henry Lawson and seeing those same forces at work today. Such illumination counters Hart's observation:

Much nonfiction is filled with ghosts, thin, transparent images that shimmer faintly in the air. They are, to resurrect a quaint, nineteenth century term, mere shades, shadows that reveal only the faintest outline of a complete human being. Disembodied voices. (2011, p. 65)

In an a / b text such as *Mrs L*, the cultural self enables absent voices to be illuminated.

Conclusion

In his essay 'The Art of Biography' (2016-2017), Marr satirises himself as a traditionalist who is 'arguing questions of taste' (p. 68) and is a 'grumpy old guy' (p. 68) in his decrying of the use of first person in biography. Grumpy or not, as one of the most well-known and respected biographers in Australia, Marr's view should be considered when deciding upon using the first person in biography as a writer constructing the narrative. But one should also consider the significance of the self that is framed by socio-political experience in the auto / biography genre: the cultural self. Larson writes:

Ideas such as how the culture or a generation pushes a writer to remember the past remain untapped...voicing how the self and culture internalise each other is, I think, where the memoir is headed. (2007, p. 182)

Such auto / biography works are also contributing to 'biography as corrective' (Hamilton, 2016, p. 15) and the following chapter further discusses the challenge to existing narratives of literary heroes Gertrude Stein and Henry Lawson.

Chapter 3: Revisionist Biography and Absent Voices

In April 1903, Bertha Lawson, wife of the poet Henry Lawson, alleged in an affidavit that her husband had been habitually drunk and cruel. Two months later during court proceedings in Sydney, he was ordered to pay maintenance of 30 shillings a week to Bertha and their two young children. After defaulting on that maintenance order Lawson was periodically imprisoned at Darlinghurst Gaol, Sydney, now the National Art School. He died in 1922 and was given a state funeral in recognition of his contribution to Australian literature and identity. As late as 2001, *The Sydney Morning Herald* included Lawson in a list of 100 most influential Australians.

Bertha Lawson died in 1957. In the decades since her death Lawson's principal biographers Colin Roderick (1982, 1991), Denton Prout (1963) and Manning Clark (1978) have portrayed Bertha as a demanding and highly-strung wife who could not cope with Lawson's bohemian lifestyle and post separation punished him with imprisonment. Bertha's actions are blamed for Lawson's creative and personal decline leading to his premature death and robbing Australia of the full potential of a revered writer. He is presented as a literary hero who was victim to both his wife and his alcoholism that together curtailed his genius.

Yet is that the only story of the Lawson marriage that should be considered or is there an alternative narrative? In this work of literary journalism, *Mrs L*, the topic is single motherhood spanning a century of social change underpinned by a constant emotional and financial vulnerability. The Lawson marriage and separation is explored from the perspective of Bertha as a mother with two children. *Mrs L* questions Henry Lawson as a husband and father. It also disrupts the lionising of an icon, thus challenging what Ian Hamilton, author of the biography *J.D Salinger*, dubbed the 'keepers of the flame' (cited in Hamilton, 2016, p. 25).

Upon completion of *Mrs L*, it became apparent that the text reached into the territory of revisionist biography or what Nigel Hamilton calls the 'biography as corrective' (2016, p. 15). He describes this impetus as 'culturally significant' (p. 18):

The work of such historians turned biographers and journalists turned biographers thus went a great way towards transforming the way biographers were seen in the decades following the 1980s. In addition their work produced chain reactions within the biographical arena. By contesting the shallow accounts and myths paraded by many historians, and by employing their forensic skills as modern, scholarly biographers, they encouraged other biographers to follow suit and, in a dialectical development, to produce competing works of challenging biography. (p. 21)

This chapter will reflect upon *Mrs L* as a corrective biography of the Lawson legend and return to *Two Lives* that also offers a corrective to the legend of Gertrude Stein in two ways. Firstly, Malcolm establishes Gertrude Stein's partner, Alice B. Toklas as equal rather than subservient. But Malcolm's wider corrective question is more socio-political: how did Gertrude and Alice survive Nazi occupied France without becoming victims to the Holocaust?

This chapter will also discuss the wider 'biography as corrective' momentum which is especially relevant to the writing of women's biographies (Caine, 2010; Milford, 1970; Wagner-Martin, 1994). Nigel Hamilton (2016) argues that biographies offer both micro and macro readings of historical events, both from the eye of the individual and also the wider social and political forces shaping their actions. He argues that the double eye of the historian turned biographer – or as Hamilton notes, the journalist turned biographer – is

contributing to the growth of the biography as corrective.

The biography as corrective and women's biographies

Mrs L has repositioned Bertha Lawson as a single mother at the turn of the century in Australia rather than the vengeful, unstable ex as portrayed by Lawson biographers (Roderick, 1982, 1991; Clark, 1978). This 'revisionist impulse' (Atler, 2013) in approaching Bertha's story is similar to the approach taken by Clare Wright in *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* (2013) which will be discussed in the following chapter, and earlier, by Nancy Milford in her biography of Zelda Scott Fitzgerald, *Zelda* (1970). Barbara Caine, in *Biography and History* (2010), argues that in the process of portraying Zelda as an artist, Milford 'offered a very different picture of Scott Fitzgerald himself' (2010, p. 107). Showing that the biography as corrective has been building for some decades, Linda Wagner-Martin identifies Milford's biography of Zelda in 1970 as a turning point in women's biographies: 'Milford told the couple's story from the woman's perspective and thereby led several generations of readers to reassess the better known male's history' (1994, p. 3).

Similar revisionist portrayals of literary wives and lovers soon followed. Sophia Tolstoy was previously portrayed as a jealous shrew until she was revisited in the 1980s (Edwards, 1981; Popoff, 2010); Nora Joyce was 'unlettered, sexual, and a bad cook' (Wagner-Martin, 1994, p. 46) until she was given her own biography (Maddox, 1989); Hadley Hemingway was 'tough' (Diliberto, 1992; Sokoloff, 1973; Wagner-Martin, 1994, p. 49); and previously Alice B. Toklas was viewed as subservient (Malcolm, 2007; Simon, 1977). Nellie Ternan (Tomalin, 1991) who had a long, clandestine relationship with Charles Dickens, was also retrieved from the shadows. Wagner-Martin calls such revisionist portrayals of literary characters and their wives as 'dual biographies... that approach the difficult problem of keeping a wife's character separate from that of her spouse' (1994, p. 44). She highlights James Joyce's wife, Nora, as an example of changed perceptions:

When Maddox tells Nora's story, the Joyce narrative becomes human. Unable to find work, Joyce lives in misery; three weeks after their first child, Giorgio, is born, Nora takes in laundry to earn money for their living. Anger, poverty, trickery, sex, good and bad, cruelty – the life of Jim and Nora Joyce is coloured with emotion. (1994, p. 24)

Sophia Tolstoy nightly transcribed and edited her husband's work while caring for nine children and enduring 13 pregnancies and working as his financial manager (Jacoby, 1981). Likewise, Bertha Lawson also assisted with transcription when Henry was restless and forgetful (Lawson, 1931) and attempted to maintain a stable home for their children as her husband became increasingly erratic due to his alcoholism. Bertha engineered a move to New Zealand to try and keep him sober (Matthews 1986, n/p). He published *While the Billy Boils* (1896); *Verses Popular and Humorous* (1900); *Joe Wilson and his Mates* (1901); and *Children of the Bush* (1902), the latter two while the couple lived in London, where Bertha suffered what would now be called postnatal depression and was hospitalised.

With Bertha's support Henry had earlier entered a rehabilitation hospital for alcoholism in 1898 after which he was sober for a year. In a 1902 letter, Bertha told him to 'be like Kipling' (1902, n/p). Her actions and letters to Henry suggest that Henry's career benefited from her stability and efforts to keep him sober rather than derailing

his literary ambition, if only for their two children's welfare as much as Henry's. It is ironic that some of his later work was directly inspired by his imprisonment.

Changing biographical practices

Mrs L portrays Bertha as an individual rather than the 'reasonably cursory treatment' (Caine, 2010, p. 106) that characterises wives in biographies of male literary writers. Caine comments that, 'Increasing numbers of biographers have faced the challenge which comes with writing of women's lives' (p. 104) and that such revisionist biographies of women have subsequently 'significantly challenged traditional assumptions and ideas...a new awareness of gender has affected biographical writing' (p. 107). Wagner-Martin further argues that the task of revisionist biography is complicated by the fact women have a public-private identity which may require a different structure than the traditional cradle to grave practice of biographic writing. In her discussion of revisionist biographies, Wagner-Martin feels the wives and lovers were initially voiceless (1994, p. 163). Her observations resonate when writing a story that spanning a century to show the contemporary parallels that underlie single parenting and also how the poetics of literary journalism can illuminate absent voices in these works.

While Lawson's biographers do not 'purge contradictory and confusing material' (Colwill, 2001, p. 593) from Lawson's life – this would be very difficult given the transparency of Lawson's alcoholism – some have claimed, or inferred, that Bertha contributed to Lawson's personal and creative decline after they were separated. The first cradle to grave biographic account of Henry Lawson, *The Grey Dreamer*, was written by Denton Prout (1963). While acknowledging the anti-feminist tone in Henry's writing after separation from his wife, Prout links it to Lawson's personal circumstances: 'The bitterness of spirit that had overcome Henry, after the separation from Bertha, grew more intense' (p. 209).

In the preface to *In Search of Henry Lawson* Manning Clark describes the book as a 'hymn of praise to a man who was great of heart' (1978, n/p). Clark's biographer, Mark McKenna, suggests it was Clark's 'extended love letter to Lawson' (2011, p. 591) and that Clark empathised with Henry Lawson, often visiting his grave in Waverley Cemetery (p. 590). Given Clark's stature, the book was reprinted in paperback with amendments as *Henry Lawson: The Man and the Legend* (1985). Clark's view was that Henry's alcoholism was the reason for the marriage ending and 'perhaps made Bertha fear her safety' (p. 134). He acknowledged that Bertha was frightened when Lawson raged that she had 'sucked the life-blood out of him and [was] destroying his creative gifts, being jealous of the one great gift he had' (p. 102). But his empathy for Bertha sharply lessens once the Lawsons separated in 1903. Clark writes that Bertha 'rejected all appeals for mercy, to forego the money owing to her, to allow him [Henry] to leave the gaol' (1978, p. 116) and that Henry incited the ire of the women's movement by failing to pay maintenance (1985 [1978], p. 136).

Colin Roderick reviewed Clark's book as 'a tangled thicket of inaccuracies, speculation and ideological interpretation' (Roderick 1978 as quoted in McKenna 2011, p. 591). In response, Roderick released his cradle to grave biography, *The Real Henry Lawson* (1982) followed by *Henry Lawson – A Life* (1991). A prolific Lawson scholar, Roderick also edited Lawson's letters (1970). Of all Lawson's biographers, Roderick embraces the victim as hero narrative chronicling the troubled, talented literary soul, tropes that are highlighted in Donald Goodwin's book, *Alcohol and the Writer* (1990). Goodwin lists 20th century American writers Poe, Fitzgerald, Hemingway,

Steinbeck and Faulkner as creative alcoholics. Lawson's literary genius was destroyed by alcoholism and domestic responsibilities yet he ultimately triumphed as an Australian literary legend with a state funeral. Robert McKee describes this story arc as 'character dimension' (1999, p. 379) and the contradictions inherent in this victim as hero narrative are what makes Lawson such a fascinating character.

McKee argues that 'supporting characters orbit the star protagonist' (p. 381) and highlights the law of conflict that he calls 'the soul of the story' (p. 211). This resonates with McKenna's observation: 'Clark's eye was first and foremost on the dramatic impact of the narrative' (2007, pp. 22-37). In Roderick's biographies external conflict is created by portraying Bertha as opposing rather than supporting Henry, especially after the 1903 separation. Roderick writes that in 1905 Bertha 'forced Henry back to his [painting] trade to meet his obligations' (1991, p. 264) and that she 'was implacable' (p. 267) when she applied to police for maintenance. He argues that Bertha envied her husband's freedom compared to her lot of caring for their two children:

Bertha saw his compositions appearing in *The Bulletin*, *The Lone Hand*, and *The Worker*. She saw Lawson taking his ease at the [hospitals] Charlemount, The Thomas Walker Convalescent Hospital and in March with [longtime friend] Mrs. Byers. Her resentment rose as she saw herself growing old feeding and clothing and educating the children. Once more she spun the wheel of retribution. (p. 267)

Caine reflects that in traditional biographies the viewpoints and judgements of the authors are most influenced by those involved in the male subject's literary, political or scientific circles (2010). In Lawson's case, Roderick valued the views of Lawson's first love and friend, the poet Dame Mary Gilmore, with whom Bertha Lawson had an antagonistic relationship, further framing Lawson's victim as hero narrative: 'if Mary Gilmore is to be credited, jealousy played a part in Bertha's remedy' (1991, p. 264). Author Ruth Park, who became friends with Bertha in Bertha's later life, was also friends with Gilmore and pointedly never mentioned Mary to Bertha, aware of their long-standing antagonism towards each other (Park, 1993).

The crux of all of the biographers' portrayals of Bertha is that Henry was unfairly imprisoned for default of maintenance payments to her and the children. Yet her actions are in the context of the cultural norm of the time that routinely saw debtors sent to prison. At Darlinghurst Gaol, Henry was housed in the debtor's quarters; however he was sent to solitary confinement for writing poetry with paper and pencil smuggled from the printer by a fellow prisoner. He also may have been briefly imprisoned in the notorious A wing for male prisoners and refers to the Gaol's chapel in his poem 'One Hundred and Three' (1908). Debtors were classified as C prisoners at Darlinghurst Gaol, indicating they had committed a minor crime and misdemeanor alongside inebriates, those with non-violent mental illness and others deemed low security (Ramsland, 2011). Lawson writes there were other men in Darlinghurst Gaol for the non-payment of maintenance in his autobiographically inspired sketch, 'Going In' (1907; Beck, 2005). Lawson did not return to jail after a committee of Lawson's friends approached Bertha in 1909 to stop legal action if they could keep him sober and hopefully working, as documented by Clark (1978) and Roderick (1982, 1991). Lawson duly went bush with friend and writer Ted Brady but his sobriety lapsed over ensuing years and he died from a stroke in 1922.

Allies for Bertha were scarce. Perhaps because of the dominant narrative's vengeful portrayal or that she is simply unremembered or considered not worth remembering. As Bertha writes to Henry in a 1903 letter: 'I have scarcely a friend' (n/p). In writing *Mrs L*, claims by the biographers were weighed against competing facts: if Bertha

was so vengeful, why did she agree to stop further legal action and inevitable jailing if his mates could dry him out?

And Rose Scott writes a letter in Bertha's defence to *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1922 after Henry's death:

...knowing the bitter anguish she has suffered and the strenuous time through which she has passed while making a home and educating her two children, knowing how both for the sake of the children and their father she has suffered in silence... (1922, p. 6)

Artist Norman Lindsay declared in his memoir, *Bohemians at the Bulletin*, that he knew and liked Bertha whom he met when she was managing the Angus and Robertson Gallery in Sydney (1965, p. 59).

Aside from Rose Scott, Bertha's clearest ally is Ruth Park who remembered Bertha as both a friend and an intelligent woman in her autobiography *Fishing in the Styx* (1993). They became friends when Ruth and her husband D'Arcy Niland co-write a radio play about Bertha and Henry's early romance. Park recalls: 'Bertha was a sagacious, passionate little dot of a woman, very different from the way she is portrayed in the many books about her famous husband, Henry' (1993, p. 123). She pointedly added that Bertha worked as the first book saleswoman in Australia. She then managed the Angus and Robertson Art Gallery where she became acquainted with Norman Lindsay and later began a career in child welfare. Bertha was a single mother juggling a professional career, foreshadowing the lives of many single parents today.

After Lawson's death in 1922, perhaps anticipating historical antipathy towards her, Bertha contributed a memoir about their marriage to the anthology of Lawson memories by colleagues and friends, edited by their daughter Bertha and John Le Gay Brereton in 1931, *Henry Lawson by his Mates*. She then published her memoir with co-writer and second partner, writer Will Lawson (no relation to Henry), *My Henry Lawson* in 1943. She writes at length of their meeting and marriage, their sojourn teaching at a Maori school in New Zealand, then their 'troubled times' (p. 66) in London and briefly, their marriage breakdown. She doesn't, perhaps out of care for his post-death legendary status, go into specific detail about Henry's jailing for lack of child support. Nor does she disclose her allegations of domestic violence in an affidavit lodged prior to their judicial separation in 1904. She says, 'At heart he was a good husband and father – except when the temptation to drink was too strong' (p. 81).

Literary Journalism Biography as Revisionist Biography

Two Lives: Gertrude Stein and Alice B Toklas by Janet Malcolm is a revisionist biography that is also a work of literary journalism. Malcolm's isn't the first biography to focus on Stein's partner as much as Stein - Linda Simon (1977) writes a biography exclusively on Toklas – but Malcolm is notable for her literary journalism method that illuminates Toklas' previously absent voice in narratives about Stein through character development, symbolism and voice.

Reviewer and author Nicholas Delbanco describes the title as a reference to Stein's *Three Lives* (1909) 'and the absent third person is the author herself' (2007, n/p). Reviewing for the *New York Times*, author Katie Roiphe questions if Malcolm's presence 'subsumes' this narrative but arguably both Malcolm's and Toklas' voice are equal to Stein's in the biography.

Malcolm's biography was immediately noted by Roiphe as a different take on the Gertrude Stein legend. Roiphe argues: 'She [Malcolm] dispenses entirely with the reverence of more traditional biographies' (2007, n/p).

Instead, Roiphe writes, *Two Lives* was a piercing inquiry into the couple's relationship that its tensions were a microcosm of the darkness around them. In the course of her research, Malcolm explores Stein and Toklas' peculiar relation to their Jewishness during the war and delves into their friendship with a French anti-Semite and collaborator who protected them. She [Malcolm] also looks beneath the official myth of genius and caretaker to get at the darker, more ambiguous power dynamic between Stein and Toklas. (n/p)

Malcolm writes that after Stein's death in 1946, 'Toklas came into her own as a personality. She no longer sat with wives of geniuses. She began to have young men – if not young geniuses – of her own' (2007, pp. 209-210). But Malcolm ensures that Toklas is established in her own personality before Stein's death by focusing on their relationship conflict rather than painting Toklas as subservient to Stein's genius. The character development is fully formed through the use of scene-by-scene construction that shows the equality, if not dominance, Toklas wielded in their relationship behind the famed salon doors. Malcolm focuses on Toklas' jealousy over Stein's past lover, May Bookstaver. Malcolm recounts that the Stein scholar, Ulla E. Dydo, 'came across something extremely odd' (p. 59) while analysing a manuscript of 'Stanzas in Meditation' published after Stein's death (1957). In the poem, Stein had systematically changed the word 'may' to 'can'. According to Dydo, the change was to placate Toklas, who had realised that 'may' referred to Stein's former lover and the poem was a love letter to an ex. Malcolm visualises the scene with Dydo and other Stein scholars:

'How do you imagine the scene?' I asked Dydo. She and Burns and Rice and I were sitting around a table in an alcove of Burn's living room, a light-filled space sparsely furnished with modernist furniture, its walls crammed with paintings, drawings and photographs.

'Do you think Alice stood over Gertrude and watched her change the 'mays' to 'cans'?'

'No,' Dydo said.

'No,' Rice said.

'It's far more punitive for Alice to say, 'You go there and you do it! You do it tonight! In your room!'' Dydo made her normally pleasant voice become a harsh bark.

'Go to the corner and do it,' Rice said.

'The manuscript tells a terrible story,' Burns said. 'The force with which these words are crossed out. The anger with which this was done. Some of the slashes go right through the paper.'

'You almost expect to see blood,' Rice said.

Stein's acceptance of the punishment inflicted on her poem by the infuriated Toklas is almost beyond understanding. (2007, pp. 62-63)

Malcolm then writes a scene from Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964) that shows the normally strong Stein mewling to Toklas: 'Miss Stein's voice came pleading and begging, saying 'Don't, pussy. Don't. Don't, please don't. I'll do anything pussy but please don't do it. Please don't. Please don't, pussy'' (p. 64).

In illuminating Toklas' voice in the above scene, Malcolm shows that Stein was influenced, if not led by Toklas, rather than the other way around. Malcolm repeatedly comes back to the endearment, 'pussy', as a subversive symbol for what she has interpreted as Toklas' dominance in the relationship. Discussing Toklas' Jewishness, Malcolm reflects:

How Stein would have situated herself in the post-Auschwitz world, had she lived, we cannot know of course. From the evidence of her chronic contrariness, we may assume that pussy's way would not have been her own (2007, p. 107).

Conclusion

Revisionist biographies attract criticism precisely because a new perspective upsets the biographic apple cart. Wagner-Martin (1994) writes that she was shocked by the reaction to her 1987 biography of Sylvia Plath, accusing her of being unethical and attempting to malign Plath's husband and family. In Tomalin's biography *The Invisible Woman* (1991) Nellie Ternan was seen as detrimental to Dickens' legacy, and Tomalin has discussed encountering hostility from those who still see the biography as unseemly towards such a great man (Wyndham, 2015). In revisiting Bertha Lawson, there was concern over angelicising her, especially given the layer of a contemporary memoir of single parenting over her story. Elizabeth Colwill best recognises this conundrum when she writes that there is a 'lived complexity of our lives that opens rich readings of our subjects' (2001, p. 437) and that there is 'tension between our identification with our subjects and the mystery – our baffling distance from them' (p. 437).

As the marriage always remained in the limbo of judicial separation after Lawson's death, Bertha was Henry's widow. Her public profile in celebrating Lawson's life, such as at the unveiling of the Lawson statue in the Domain in 1931, attracted perhaps more justifiable criticism than her jailing him for non-payment of maintenance. Ruth Park recalls that two years before Bertha died in 1957 she still introduced herself as 'Mrs. Henry Lawson' (1993, p. 191). In the years leading to Lawson's death, letters between Henry and Bertha show a reconciled civility in the shared interest of their children with the animosity largely dissipated. Perhaps Bertha loved Henry Lawson but couldn't live with him, which is why she resisted the final court application to dissolve the marriage. He never sought the decree either and instead lived platonically with the loyal Mrs Byers. As Wagner-Martin notes:

Biographers of women have a further responsibility: to understand both their subject's cultures and their own and to provide their readers with a bridge back into history, so that they understand why certain behaviours then were approved or disapproved. (1994, p. 29)

By revisiting the story of Bertha Lawson, the narrative repositions her within a divorce discourse that was emerging in Australia at the turn of the 20th century and the emotional and financial costs of single parenting that remain debated today. Bertha and Henry's daughter, also called Bertha, writes about her parents' complex personalities and separation in her unpublished memoirs now lodged in the State Library of NSW. These memories have been included in the revisited narrative of Bertha Lawson. This epistolary strategy (Clark, 2007) in literary journalism life writing to illuminate Bertha and others' voices will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: The Uses of Epistolary in Literary Journalism

Reflecting on her writing practice in *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood remembers that as a child she played a chase game centred around the verse: 'I wrote a letter to my love / And on the way I dropped it / a little doggie picked it up and put it in his pocket' (2003, p. 118). Atwood recalls that the chasing element of the game didn't interest her. What did was the lost letter, symbolised in the game by a dropped handkerchief:

How terrible it was that it had been lost, and the person to whom it was written would never get it! How equally terrible that someone else had found it! My only consolation was that dogs can't read. (2003, p.118)

But what if a literary journalist finds that letter many years later bundled in a forgotten folder in a library archive? What if that letter becomes an epistolary strategy to illuminate absent voices in a historical narrative, such as Bertha Lawson, the subject of *Mrs L*? What if this strategy can replace immersion and interview to illuminate absent voices?

With reference to literary journalism scholars Hart (2011) and Clark (2007), voice scholar John Durham Peters (1999, 2004), *Mrs L* and the *Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* (Wright, 2013), this chapter will discuss how epistolary sources in literary journalism, particularly biography, can cross the border of time and in doing so illuminate absent voices. *Forgotten Rebels* has an elaborate structure in its arrangement of chapters that begin with evocative scene-setting details of the Ballarat goldfields, and then returns to journeys from England and back to the Goldfields, with narrative vignettes in between. Written in the third person, Wright as author is actively present in the narrative. It therefore fulfils Sims' poetics of literary journalism from the book's beginning detailing the aftermath of the 1854 Eureka Stockade:

The ground is hard and dry. The dirt yields grudgingly as the gravedigger thrusts his shovel in. The summer sun blazes down, making thirsty work of a job that is grim enough without the intense heat. The crowd will be here soon, and there are still holes to dig...It's Monday Morning, 4 December 1854. The township of Ballarat and its goldfields have woken to a strange dawn. (p. 1)

The inclusion of Wright expands the notion of biography as corrective to a collective corrective biography (Caine, 2010, p. 59). By focusing on the women of the goldfields, Wright has reframed the Australian goldfields as feminine and feminist. Wright extracts from May Howell's account of her life at the diggings:

I dare say it is an independent life, trusting to yourself, putting forth all your energy, no leaning on others, no one to control, or dictate to you, going where you like, doing what you like, no relation laying down the law, and chalking out your path in life. (p. 57)

Epistolary Material and Literary Journalism

While there is much scholarship around epistolary novels – written as letters or diaries (Gurkin Altman, 1982) which have synergies with literary journalism, little scholarship has engaged with epistolary journalism. The 'strange power' of letters and its relationship to journalism is identified by US journalism historian Katrina Quinn (2007) who regards 19th century newspaper editor Samuel Bowles' series of letters to his paper

recounting his travels across America in 1856 as an early example of epistolary practices by a literary journalist. Selected colonial letters are also included in the Australian Colonial Literary Journalism Database (McDonald, Avieson, Davies, 2015) but only if they met the definition of literary journalism (McDonald, 2015). Quinn engages similar scrutiny: 'Bowles also engages the structures of narrative literature and the dynamics of epistolary writing to express most fully the complex human experience of his trip across the continent' (2007, p. 2). This historical background shows the potential for letters as literary journalism in their own form, suggesting a work of literary journalism could follow the structure of an epistolary novel if the series of letters exhibited both literary journalism techniques and 'verifiable content' (Connery, 1992, p. xiv) as required by literary journalism.

John Durham Peters suggests narrative voice can transcend time and space (1999) and, while Durham Peters' observation is not directed towards literary journalism, it is interesting to compare to Sim's observation about literary journalism and time. Acknowledging that 'time is an impenetrable barrier' (2012, p. 35) Sims nonetheless suggests that some literary journalism texts, such as *And Their Children After Them* (Maharidge & Williamson, 2008), *Tears in the Darkness* (Norman & Norman, 2009) and *The Promised Land* (Lemann, 1991), are books that have 'crossed the border of time' (2012, p. 35). *Mrs L* and the work of historical, multi-biography *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* also have crossed this border, primarily because of the emphasis on epistolary material that illuminates absent voices. In doing so, the texts enact Roy Peter Clark's idea of 'epistolary journalism' outlined in his blog post for the Poynter Institute:

I have a hunch there's something called 'epistolary journalism.' This occurs, I would argue, when a reporter advances a story by quoting extensively from the letters, instant messages, voicemail messages, even yearbook autographs of key characters. Such evidence has a strange power, serving as another form of monologue or dialogue. (2007, n/p)

Clark relates epistolary journalism to the techniques of the epistolary novel, which is written in diary or letter form. *Mrs L's* use of epistolary sources was influenced by Hannah Kent's *Burial Rights* (2014) that, while not an epistolary novel in its entirety, punctuated each chapter with a letter in full from historical archives that drove the narrative forward. This connection suggests that in literary journalism the use of epistolary material can be a strategy that contributes to the narrative to illuminate voice, and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, replace immersion when, due to the time period, it is not possible to do so.

In doing this, the epistolary strategy can involve Hart's narrative framework (2011, p. 65). Hart explicitly acknowledges the role of epistolary material in literary journalism but stops short of recommending a work of literary journalism as a series of letters following the structure of the epistolary novel:

Sources such as letters, diaries and autobiography allow for a personal voice, expressed through the character's own words, but it must be placed within a larger frame set by the author. (2011, p. 65)

Epistolary Strategy and Voice

The importance of epistolary material is that it allows character and voice to be heard. For this reason, Patricia Addis included letters in her collection of women's autobiographical writing, clarifying: 'I have included

published collections of letters because they can provide a wealth of detail, an immediacy, and even an emotional intensity that are now always found in a carefully crafted autobiography prepared for public readership' (1983, pp. x-xi).

In their yellowing original glory in the archives, the letters from Bertha Lawson to Henry, and his scrawls in return, are captivating and contemporary. They illuminate Bertha's voice through their clarity and intimacy, which as will be later discussed in this chapter, can be a replacement for the literary journalism strategy of immersion. Epistolary scholar William Decker (1998) suggests that epistolary communication is inevitably associated with intimacy, which is a feature of the voice of literary journalism, to be discussed later in this chapter. He further argues that there is an archival attraction to read such letters to understand the human condition and that writers can use letters to 'consciously achieve an empathy (if not always a sympathy) with the stultifying and tragic dimensions of human experience that letter writers frequently articulate' (p. 7).

Echoing Genette (1988), Hart also clarifies that voice is more than simply who is speaking; rather it is writing through a lens or 'who sees' (2011, p. 201). Bertha's previously absent voice in *Mrs L* is given both authority and 'sees' through the use of her letters written to Henry in the lead up to, through and after their separation. As Wagner-Martin notes, approaching a revisionist biography of a character who has been previously silenced – 'a subject without language or voice' (1994, p. 163) – is difficult. Bertha's letters show that she is concerned with the survival of the children rather than self-pity, that she tries to persuade Henry to 'be yourself' and stop drinking, and that she wants Henry to have a relationship with his children. In illuminating Bertha's voice, the letters engender empathy (Gornick, 2001) that is lacking from the paraphrasing of her words in previous biographies, or framing them by dismissive comment.

In early versions of *Mrs L*, there were attempts to reconstruct scenes based on these letters, but apart from concerns (and limitations) of accuracy, the reconstructions did not match the strength of Bertha's voice. When using literary journalism techniques in biography, the writer must also consider the illumination of the voice of the subject, particularly as it had been so previously silenced. Similarly, *The Forgotten Rebels* relies on letters, journals and diaries to illuminate the voices of the women in the goldfields. The title sets the corrective tone, and Wright uses a narrative frame (Hart, 2011) around the epistolary material that concerns the wider social and political context. She is also an active author with a distinct voice of her own that aids in the illumination of the voices of the women on the goldfields.

An epistolary strategy as a replacement for immersion and interview in historical literary journalism

The literary journalism technique of immersion in the actual event can be replaced with an epistolary strategy that provides the crucial scene setting, forensic detail, emotion, thought and dialogue that contributes towards the illumination of absent voices.

In *Mrs L*, Bertha's letters give details such as her list of bills and her tramping around the streets job hunting. The letters from Henry Lawson to Mrs Byers, who cared for him, give the evocative detail of Henry's life in jail. Deborah Beck, the author of *A History of Darlinghurst Gaol and the National Art School* (2005), observes that

Henry's poetry is the best description of the Gaol in the early 1900s, and his letters are equally evocative of a prisoner's reality. In *The Forgotten Rebels*, the women's letters reveal immersion-like detail of the voyage to Australia and life on the goldfields. Wright extracts a letter from Louisa Timewell about her arrival in Melbourne:

Passing down the Yarra Yarra, she wrote, we saw thousands of bullocks' and sheep's heads lying at the edge of the river a little way from the slaughtering house, rotting in a heap. I thought how many poor families would be glad of them in England. (2013, p. 87)

Epistolary strategy can illuminate voices in more recent history using digital epistolary forms, such as Facebook messages, emails, and texts. In future years the literary journalist will be more reliant on these digital epistolary forms than physical letters, as is shown already in *Mrs L*. The memoir element's epistolary material was drawn from both postcards and emails sent and received through the course of a ten-year marriage.

In his discussion of epistolary journalism that uses born-digital material, Clark (2007) cites a *St Petersburg Times* investigation by journalist Chris Tisch (2007) about con artist Shirley Gordon, that includes her emails to her target, a chiropractor. He also cites a story by Cathy Frye (2003) about online predators who cyber stalk. In 2002, a collection of digital material was pooled by survivors and families and friends of victims of the morning of the 9 / 11 attack, and *New York Times* writers Jim Dwyer, Eric Lipton, James Glanz and Ford Fessedon (2002) drew on these emails and texts as an epistolary strategy to reconstruct the last 102 minutes before the World Trade Centre collapsed on September 11, 2001. The writers compared the last phone calls, texts and emails sent from those who survived the impact of the planes, then died, as 'like messages in an electronic bottle from people marooned in some distant sky, their last words narrate a world coming undone' (2002, n/p). The article also shows that collective historical voices written as vignettes, as Wright has done in *The Forgotten Rebels*, build a compelling multi- biographical narrative: 'taken together though, the words from the upper floors not only offer a broad and chilling view of the devastated zones but the only window onto acts of bravery, decency and grace at a brutal time' (2002, n/p). Two of the writers continued with the research as a book, *102 Minutes* (Flynn and Dwyer, 2005).

The larger frame around the contemporary voice can put fragments of epistolary material into a cohesive context. To reconstruct the last 102 minutes, the writers interviewed victims' families, watched video, obtained times of calls and rescue records, as well as survivors. The emails and texts are supplemented by direct interviews, recorded messages and emergency calls, showing how epistolary material can be interwoven with other research. Similarly, in *Mrs L* and *Forgotten Rebels*, the epistolary material is supplemented by other archival research, such as jail and divorce records, newspaper articles and legislation, and digital epistolary material.

Ethical Considerations and Epistolary Strategy in Literary Journalism

As Atwood acknowledges, aside from copyright issues, there is also the moral copyright argument over republishing material meant for confidential reading. Wrestling with writing a memoir about a short-lived marriage, Nancy Miller argues: 'Perhaps there's such a thing as an ethical betrayal: publish the letters and let the man speak for himself' (2004, p. 157). Her comments play both into the ethical sphere and also the argument that an illuminated voice – 'the man speak for himself' – is better than one that is not heard directly.

In the case of *Mrs L*, Bertha Lawson's letters allowed 'the woman to speak for herself' as well as, in the

case of Henry Lawson and my ex-husband Daniel's emails, 'the man to speak for himself'. Daniel also granted permission for an interview and contributed to the autobiography element of the book, ensuring his voice is heard in the text.

Janet Gurkin Altman suggests that epistolarity tangles illusion and reality and as such, 'can only be argued as an interpretative act' (1982, p. 6). With interpretation in mind, authenticity is an issue in epistolary strategy. *In Search of Yage* (1963) was initially regarded as an epistolary narrative of genuine letters from William Burroughs to Alan Ginsberg as Burroughs hunted for the South American drug, ayahuasca, a decade earlier. Its scene-by-scene construction and other literary devices suggested it was possibly a work of epistolary literary journalism mimicking the epistolary novel. It is now understood to be an epistolary novel only as just 320 words of the 9,500 word manuscript are from correspondence between the two writers (Harris, 2006). Stephen Pyne's counsel is advice for those literary journalists considering an epistolary strategy: 'In nonfiction, the author can work only with the evidence available' (2009, p. 40).

There are further ethical considerations to using epistolary material. Decker (1998) recognises that research using epistolary material questions the lines between public and private domains. As Margaret Atwood asks, should we be reading a letter meant for someone else? Atwood suggests:

Forged letters, letters gone astray and never received, letters that are destroyed or fall into the wrong hands...all these confusions and mistakes and acts of misapprehension and malice have taken place many times over, and continue to take place. (2003, p. 118)

Atwood's view mirrors that of Malcolm who, despite writing biographies herself, reveals her conflict over the ethics of writing about others, likening it to a burglary (1994). However, the ethical considerations of epistolary material are often formalised as libraries that receive donated papers are sometimes directed by the donor to restrict material and a pain and embarrassment form to protect reputations may be presented to the viewer before access to the trove is permitted. While researching *Mrs L* at the State Library NSW, pain and embarrassment to the living forms were presented upon requesting access to the Mary Gilmore collection. Ruth Park's archive was also restricted until permission was granted by her literary agent.

Henry Lawson died in 1922, Bertha in 1957 and Mary Gilmore in 1962 so the border of time is long enough to not cause distress. Henry and Bertha's children have both passed away, leaving no known heirs. The wider family are aware of the book and its empathy with Bertha rather than Henry Lawson. Mary Gilmore's immediate family has also died.

Wright was also dealing with epistolary material from a century prior to her writing and republished personal letters in the comfort of historical distance. As previously mentioned she interviewed Eureka descendants. But the *New York Times* authors (2002) had a far more sensitive task:

Eight months after the attacks many survivors and family and friends of the lost are pooling their recollections, tapes and phone records and 157 have shared accounts of their contacts for this article. At least 353 of those lost were able to reach people outside the towers. Spoken or written at the hour of death, these are intimate, lasting words. The steep emotional cost of making them public is worth paying, their families say, for a clearer picture of those final minutes. Many also hope the history of the day is enlarged beyond memorials to the unquestioned valour of 343 firefighters and 78 other uniformed rescuers. It is time they say to account for the civilians. (2002, n/p)

Just as using the methods of interview or immersion for a work of contemporary literary journalism, literary journalists working historically with epistolary material are also ethically bound to consider the feelings of those who are living, such as survivors and close relatives of those at the centre of their epistolary research.

Conclusion

When writing a work that is a convergence of literary journalism and biography, the highly effective techniques of immersion and interviews are often not available due to the 'tyranny of time' (Sims, 2012). Beyond revisiting place, time prohibits observing events as they happen, and recording conversations heard or recounted in interviews. A lack of immersion and interview are a significant barrier to creating voice in the work of literary journalism. However, an epistolary strategy can replace immersion and interviews and so can illuminate absent voices around a larger narrative frame as shown in *Mrs L* and *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka*. A digital epistolary strategy of texts and emails as used to compelling, heartbreaking effect in *102 Minutes*, shows that the digital forms need to be preserved for future historical narrative power as much as their archival value. Perhaps then, it won't be so terrible that someone else has found the letter, because that letter has brought an absent voice to life.

Conclusion

Mrs L began as a memoir of single parenting but has evolved into a work of auto / biography (a / b) written with the poetics of literary journalism. As this exegesis has demonstrated, that evolution not only illuminated Bertha Lawson's voice, but in doing so has challenged existing narratives of Henry Lawson. So, as well as a work of a / b, *Mrs L* became a work of revisionist biography or a 'biography as corrective' (Hamilton 2016, p. 15). Bertha Lawson is interpreted empathetically through the lens of single mother rather than that of a bitter ex-wife who 'spun the wheels of retribution' jailing Henry for non-payment of child support (Roderick, 1991 p. 267) and 'sucked the life-blood out of him [Henry]' (Clark, 1978, p. 102). It remains to be seen how this reframing will be received when the literary journalism is published as a book (UQP, 2017).

In order to answer the core research question behind this exegesis – what have I written? - the research drew upon the scholarship on literary journalism, memoir, biography, revisionist biography and a / b, the latter that is one of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's (2001) 52 genres of life writing, along with memoir. My research also extended to a broad reading of texts that experiment with genre in similar ways to *Mrs L* to explore how other authors use literary journalism techniques in biography and /or memoir to illuminate absent voices from their historical shadows. To this end, I finally chose Malcolm's *Two Lives* (2007), Grant's *Talking to My Country* (2016) and Wright's *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* (2013).

Chapter One 'Literary Journalism and Biography' expands upon Sims' poetics of literary journalism in relation to *Two Lives* (Malcolm 2007) and *Mrs L*. In doing so, the chapter shows the relationship between contemporary literary journalism and biography beyond James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. The chapter affirms Virginia Woolf's belief that art and fact – the granite and the rainbow – (1958 [1927], p. 189) can exist in innovative biography practice and arguably this is due to the presence of the poetics of literary journalism in the work.

Chapter Two returns to the practice of memoir and its place in biography. Retaining the memoir element within the auto / biography of *Mrs L* allows for a contemporary experience of single parenting to compare with that of Bertha Lawson. This approach has been criticised by biographer David Marr (2016-2107) who calls such biographies 'quests' (p. 66) and suggests that including the self diminishes rather than enhances these works.

Yet there is a counter-resistance in exploring how including the self can deepen the practice of biography, rather than weaken it, because the self is framed by socio-political experience, as shown in *Mrs L* and *Two Lives*. Drawing on Eakin (1992), Larson (2007), Chawla (2008) and multi-disciplinary scholarship (Calvillo, 2003; De Munck, 2000; Schaubert, 2002) the chapter posits that a cultural self is often at work in the auto / biography genre as much as in memoir (Grant, 2016; Larson, 2007).

Additionally, the chapter notes one of Marr's few exceptions to his 'stay out of sight' rule (2016-2017, p. 66) is James Boswell, who included his voice in *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. This exception again underlines the relationship between literary journalism and biography and suggests that *The Life of Samuel Johnson* is an early example of the a / b genre.

Chapter Three moves to the other side of the a / b slash by focusing on *Mrs L* as reflecting biographies

that are corrective (Hamilton, 2016) and connects *Mrs L* to recent women's biography writing, particularly about literary wives (Caine, 2010; Maddox, 1989; Milford, 1970; Popov, 2010; Wagner-Martin, 1993). The chapter highlights how changing biographical practices (Caine, 2010) are illuminating absent voices, and through the analysis of *Mrs L* and *Two Lives*, the chapter arguably shows that the poetics of literary journalism is an integral influence on these changing practices because of the emphasis on character and voice.

Finally, Chapter Four continues the exegesis' focus on illuminating absent voices through a discussion of the uses of epistolary in literary journalism. This chapter highlights that in works of literary journalism that are historical such as *Mrs L* and *The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka* (Wright, 2013) employing a 'epistolary strategy' of letters and diaries in the narrative can replace immersion and interviewing that are not possible due to the 'barrier of time' (Sims, 2012). Such a strategy, particularly when the epistolary material is used in full, builds character development and, crucially, illuminates voice.

While this exegesis primarily reflects on the literary journalism poetics of the auto / biography genre, it would be fascinating to further research literary journalism poetics' influence on Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's (2001) other forms of life writing genres. Virginia Woolf would be well pleased that art and truth continue to co-exist.

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