

HENRY LAWSON WAS HERE

Celebrating the life of a famous Australian

LOWELL TARLING



Lowell Tarling reciting *The Blue Mountains* at the grave of Henry Lawson's father, Hartley Vale Cemetery

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lowell Tarling'.

HE WASN'T BORN IN A TENT that blew down in a storm. Contrary to legend there were no thunderclaps and there was no flood on the night of 17 June 1867. On the contrary, it was a calm and frosty night in Grenfell in western New South Wales when Henry Lawson was born in a log cabin that served as a temporary community hospital.

Henry's father, 33 year old Niels Larson, was a Norwegian-born miner. His partner in the One-Mile diggings claim, Wilhelm Slee (later Chief Inspector of Mines for New South Wales), was a member of the Grenfell Hospital committee and not the kind of person who would see his mate's vulnerable 19 year old girl-wife give birth in a tent. But an older, more famous Henry was happy to go along with the tale that he was welcomed into the world with a torrent of wicked weather.

Henry's parents, Niels Larsen and Louisa Albury, met at the goldfields of Pipeclay (now Eurunderee NSW). They were married at the Wesleyan Parsonage Mudgee, eleven months before Henry was born. On the birth of their first child the family name was Anglicised. Louisa registered Henry as 'Lawson' and Niels followed suit, also changing his given name to Peter. Peter Lawson's tombstone in the Hartley Vale cemetery at the foot of Mount York, bears his original name - Niels Hertzberg Larsen, 'father of Henry Lawson, Peter, Charles, Gertrude and Henrietta'.

Henry may not have been born in a tent, but a sturdy well-reinforced tent was certainly his first home. His father had been a Norwegian sailor where handyman skills were part of his training as a Master of Navigation. Niels left his native land at the age of 21 and sailed the oceans of the world. The discovery of gold in Victoria in 1851 led to the gold rush and the city of Melbourne grew rapidly. Niels arrived in Melbourne in 1855. There he jumped ship and followed the gold rushes through Victoria and into New South Wales arriving at the diggings north of Mudgee in the central west, where he met Louisa Albury.

Niels was hardworking but he was unlucky. He left Pipeclay for Grenfell (where Henry was born) and - on hearing that another rush had broken out - back he returned to Pipeclay, this time with a wife and baby son. But the news was false. By the time Niels settled in, the diggers had already moved on. He erected a tent near his father-in-law's old shanty and that was home for the next 12 months. When Louisa gave birth to Charles, it became obvious that a tent would not do. So Niels built a two-roomed slab-and-bark hut on his father-in-law's land in Sapling Gully. They lived there until the 1870 rush to Gulgong when the family joined 20,000 others in search of instant wealth.

Henry spent his boyhood in Gulgong. The memories never went away. The landscape comprised a line of valleys and ridges and although some aspects

of the town flourished, Henry saw hardship, loneliness, subsistence farming and downright poverty. This provided the backdrop to some of his best known stories, including the masterful 'Drover's Wife', which readers often assume is set somewhere around the back of Bourke (Henry did go to Bourke). It was Gulgong.

Niels did indeed strike gold, for starters at least. He made enough to send Louisa and the two boys to Sydney for a short holiday; they returned to watch their father endure a difficult year of digger's shafts and short-lived success. The long run of failures eventually drove Niels and Louisa back to Pipeclay. Two months later their third son, Peter was born. Niels soon set about building a sawn-timber hardwood house with brick chimney and a bark roof. Some years later, Henry's younger brother Peter painted a picture of the place.

Between the ages of six and nine, Henry spent a lot of time helping his father or at least keeping him company. One of Niels' contracts was to construct the Eurunderree Public School which Henry and Charles attended – along with 40 other students. Henry modeled 'The Old Bark School' poem on these memories. The overcrowded structure soon threatened to collapse and Niels was granted another contract to build a new sawn-timber school. Eleven-year old Henry helped his father with dressing and handling the planks before attending the school himself.

Henry and his siblings were home schooled before that. Louisa was their teacher and reading was a major source of Henry's education because he had trouble hearing, even as a child. Louisa familiarised Henry with the writings of Defoe, Shakespeare, Marryat and Australian novelists Marcus Clarke (*For The Term of His Natural Life*) and Rolf Boldrewood (*Robbery Under Arms*) drawing his attention to the much-admired poet Henry Kendall. Louisa had an abiding interest in her son's development along these lines. Later she was to publish his first volume of poems. Louisa was cut from different cloth to her husband. She was a domineering type and an outspoken feminist a couple of decades before the suffragette movement was established in England. And she was something of a poet herself.

Having quarreled with her sons' teacher at the Old Bark School, Louisa transferred the boys to the Catholic School in Mudgee where they remained a few months. The master, Charles Kevan, sought Henry out and talked to him about poetry as a way of involving this dreamy lad in school activities. Later in life, Henry suggested that his teacher may have been prompted by reading his mother's poem about the death of the elder of her twin daughters, 'My Nettie' published in the Mudgee Independent.

Henry's meagre schooling ended in 1880 because his father could not make a living from his selection, so he returned to his craft as a tradesman and again sent for his son as assistant. Over the next decade the role of 'His Father's Mate' (or sidekick) would keep bringing Henry back to the Blue Mountains, especially in and around Blackheath and Mount Victoria where he heard exciting tales of bushrangers, miners and explorers, told by other workers or by swaggers who stopped for a smoke and a feed.

In 1883, disease in the stock ended all hopes that the Lawson family could survive on their selection. The end of those dreams also ended the marriage. Louisa packed and left for Sydney. She sent for Henry, getting him an apprenticeship at the Hudson



Above: Lawson's Cottage

Brothers coach-making factory in Clyde. Henry named them 'Grinder Brothers' in the 'Arvie Aspinall' stories he wrote about this period. Louisa and Henry at first lived in Lewisham then later moved to Phillip Street where Henry started writing in earnest. Walking the city, Henry saw the desperate poverty that inspired poems like 'Faces in the Street', his impression of Sydney in 1888.

Louisa turned her Phillip Street home into a haven for thinkers – had she been wealthier you would call it a 'salon'. There was plenty of discourse about spiritualism, women's rights and republicanism. Moved by the politics of these exciting discussions Henry wrote 'Sons of the South' and dropped the manuscript into the hands of a cleaner at the Bulletin office in Castlereagh Street before running off. The poem found its way to a sub-editor who passed it to the editor-in-chief, the anti-imperial and larger-than-life J.F. Archibald, who instantly saw merit in Henry's writing. He renamed the poem 'A Song of the Republic' and published it in the October 1887 issue. From this nervous beginning, Henry Lawson became the famous writer we know today.

Henry's personal life reflected his divided relationship with his parents. Stimulated by his mother's urban habitat he would then return to Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains where he'd enjoy quiet walks in the bush overlooking the Kanimbla Valley. From republican to painter's assistant - both roles gave him subject matter for poems and stories. His early childhood spent in Grenfell, Mudgee, Eurunderie and Gulgong provided the setting for many of his tales, with the solitary woman and the defeated overworked man often his central characters.

1888 was a pivotal year for Henry. 'Andy's Gone With Cattle' was a breakthrough poem. It described the lot of the itinerant worker who went where he could find work from the viewpoint of the woman left to hold the household together without him. Another well-loved poem written in the same year is 'The Blue Mountains'. Lawson wrote about the city and also the country, never quite at home in either.

In May 1888 Louisa launched her feminist paper *The Dawn*. Niels died in December. Henry arrived one day after his father's death and got properly drunk, a habit that never left him. His young companions were known as the Mountains Push. Two of them, Arthur Parker and Jack (Johnny) Jones, wrote about their time together in Henry Lawson by His Mates, published in 1931. Henry's alcoholism was not apparent at this time - he drank no more than his cronies. Later, it was more, much more.

Parker recalls meeting the poet in 1887 in Mount Victoria when Henry was painting Buena Vista, a row of four cottages, with his

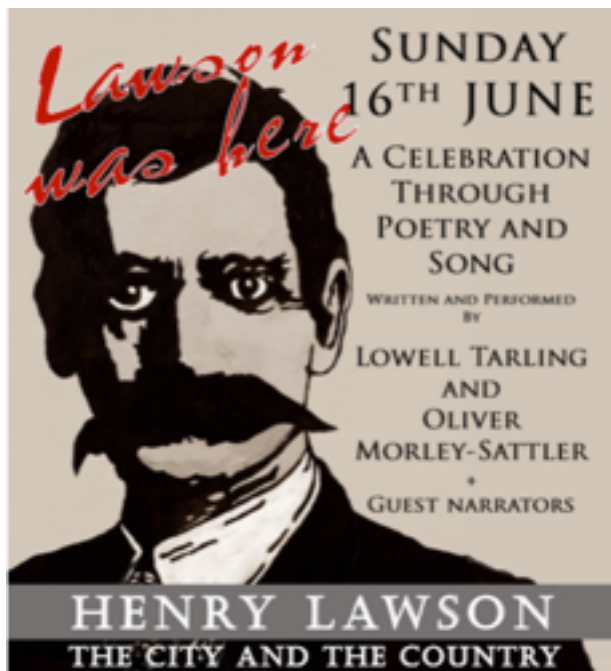
father. Arthur had a shotgun to sell which Henry didn't wish to buy. He only wanted to pay for the use of it. Later they worked together with Henry painting and Arthur doing the plastering.

Henry loved the beauty of the ranges and the mountain gullies. He was constantly prowling the bush. One favourite walk led him through Fairy Bower to the Kanimbla Valley. Arthur Parker recalls one occasion: 'He roused me out at nine o'clock at night to walk to Blackheath with him, just to look at Govett's Leap by moonlight. He enjoyed beautiful scenery in a quiet way. Read *The Blue Mountains*, *Rain in the Mountains*, *The Old Stone Chimney* and other poems he wrote then...'

They did a lot of tramping together, including a walk towards Shipley where they observed rock wallabies and possums, and between the Second Bridge and Camel's Back Rock, a great spot for seeing lyrebirds. The Mountain Push also made a practice of camping out, taking packhorses down the steep incline from Mount Victoria to the Kanimbla Valley and camping at Cherry Tree Flat under Mount Blackheath. Another time they went to Cox's River with Henry shooting hares and getting lost. They also wandered to Jenolan Caves belting out Home Rule for Ireland and Annie Laurie in proud voices and fancying themselves, at times, like old Blue Mountains pioneers.

One favourite walk is the track from Sunset Rock west to Engineers Cascade. It has been suggested that the view from

Henry Lawson's birthday (17 June 1867) will be commemorated with a show at Gallery One88, Katoomba Street, Katoomba on 16 June. info@galleryONE88finearts.com Participating also will be Oliver Morley-Sattler, songwriter, drummer and instrumentalist. He is frontprson of Blue Mountains Grunge duo Paperhill and lives in Medlow Bath.



Sunset Rock across Kanimbla and north to Victoria Pass and west atop the escarpment provided the earliest inspiration for Henry's verse. In 1941 the Mount Victoria Trustees named it the 'Henry Lawson Walk' as it is known today.

Jack Jones' memories go back even further. He recalled splashing around in creeks with Henry when they were 13. Jack and Henry walked for miles through the bushland around Mount Victoria and Blackheath, paddling up creeks and swimming in water holes - until Henry went to his mother in Sydney and returned as a young man. That was okay. They picked up where their friendship left off, working on cottages together by day and carousing by night. One poignant memory was when Jack and Arthur Parker were driving down Mount Victoria where they overtook Henry driving a cart. He was taking down some pickets for his father's grave in the Hartley Vale cemetery.

Recalling those days, in 1891 Henry penned *The Ghost at the Second Bridge*, an eerie tale of the girl in black who haunts that place.

I'd tramped as far as Hartley Vale

Tho' tired at the start

But coming back I got a lift in Johnny Jones' cart

The tale develops into a ghostly murder ballad:

*... a teamster killed his wife, for those old days were rough -
and here a dozen others had been murdered right enough...*

Moving on with:

Then Jimmy Bent came riding up

A tidy chap was Jim

He shouted twice, and so of course

We had to shout for him.

And when at last we said good-night

He bet a vulgar quid

That we would see the 'ghost in black',

And sure enough we did.

Lawson speaks to Australians – wherever they are. His poems and short stories are read by schoolchildren and celebrated in film and in song. Amongst a string of honours, Henry and Louisa are the only mother-and-son to appear independently on Australian postage stamps. We search for him in the 21st century amongst the relics of what we imagine represents a cornerstone of Australian morality - 'mateship'.

If you want to find Henry Lawson, he'll be traveling that great western road, carrying pen and paper in one hand and a sad bottle in the other. The stretch of land from Mudgee to Sydney via the Blue Mountains coloured everything he wrote.

LOWELL TARLING is the author of many books, amongst them the biographies of Tiny Tim and of Martin Sharp in two parts (ETT Imprint) available from bookshops or Booktopia (online). He lives in Katoomba.