

Kay Schaffer: Henry Lawson - The People's Poet

Author: Kay Schaffer

Title: Henry Lawson: The People's Poet

Journal: Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition

Imprint: 1988, Pages 112-147

Australia is Lawson writ large.

Manning Clark, *In Search of Henry Lawson*

Henry Lawson is an archetypal figure in Australian culture. In 1918 David McKee Wright named him 'the first articulate voice of the real Australian'.¹ Some years later, Vance Palmer wrote that Lawson was 'a portent' for the nation.² Portent he has been for formulators of the Australian tradition. Critics still argue, to the delight of press and public, about the significance of this man. In his best apocalyptic style, Manning Clark has warned that Australia is 'Lawson writ large ... a forewarning to all of us of "wretched days to be"'.³ Colin Roderick, faithful to the legend that is Lawson, has countered that Lawson remains our 'poet-prophet ... for universal brotherhood', who held 'an ideal ... up to mankind'.⁴

The complex character of Henry Lawson and the rich complexity of his stories appear to open unlimited options for interpreting the man and his work. He has become a cultural myth, a legend. And like all myths, the myth of Henry Lawson helps us to understand something about Australian culture while it also imposes that meaning upon us. It is not Henry Lawson himself, but the stories about 'Lawson' that have accumulated and been circulated through culture over time, which make him a legend. Layers of myths and interpretations have been built up around the writer and his works. The uses of Lawson, the social and political contexts into which he is put, and the interpretations produced through social practice but received as truth—these have made Lawson a cultural object. It is the cultural object, handed down to Australians through commentary and cultural practice, not the man himself, which will be the focus of this chapter.

David McKee Wright's preface to Lawson's *Selected Poems* published in 1918 gave substance and structure to the legendary view of Lawson as Australia's pioneering artist, the saint and not the sinner of the familiar dichotomy. The timing was sadly ironic. Publication coincided with a period in Lawson's life when his physical health and creative abilities were at their lowest ebb. The artist's reputation, however, has evolved not in the light of his actual circumstances, but through the layers of encoded knowledge about Lawson, such as that related in Wright's preface. But there is a common element which can be detected in Lawson's diffident constructions of himself in the autobiographical writings and in the ambivalent constructions of 'Henry Lawson' by critics and biographers throughout the twentieth century—that is, the naming of woman as the source and origin of man's (Lawson's and/or the national character's) failings. This can be demonstrated through an analysis of the discourse of Lawson-on-Lawson, and that reiterated by formulators of the Lawson industry, which has survived and flourishes to this day.

The Construction of Henry Lawson

By 1918 Henry Lawson was in decline. From the time of his final separation from his wife, Bertha, in 1903, his life had been one of slow but steady deterioration of both physical and creative energies. His bouts with alimony and alcohol resulted in several trips to gaol on charges of non-payment of support and abuse to his wife, and to the Convalescent Home for brief periods of drying-out and to the Mental Asylum at Darlinghurst, 'to escape from the damned lunatics outside',⁵ as he wrote to a friend.

When Lawson searched for the source of his wretchedness, he settled on obstacles in the world outside. He blamed not the police, who were, after all, 'only doing their duty', nor his bohemian drinking mates, who stood with him at the pub's 'mystical communion rail', but women, whom he accused of 'sucking the life

blood out of him and destroying his creative gifts'.⁶ His anti-feminism can be detected in the poem 'One-Hundred-and-Three', written in 1908 and revised during this later period of despondency:

*The clever scoundrels are all outside, and the moneyless mugs in goal—
Men do twelve months for a mad wife's lies or Life for a strumpet's tale.
If the people knew what the warders know, and felt as the prisoners feel—
If the people knew, they would storm the gaols as they stormed the old Bastille.*⁷

These anti-feminist sentiments, like those in his essay, 'The She Devil', (1904), are a world apart from Lawson's idealization of women in his radical nationalist days of the early 1890s, when he was inclined to represent women as symbols of the revolutionary ferment of the times:

*Last night as I lay sleeping out a vision came to me:
A girl with face as fair and grand as ever man might see—
Her form was like the statues raised to Liberty in France,
And in her hand a blood-red flag was wrapped about a lance.
She shook the grand old colour loose, she smiled at me and said:
'Go bid your brothers gather for the Waving of the red'.*

(*'Waving of the Red', 1893*)⁸

Those were the days when Lawson believed: 'We'll know the worth of a purer youth / When the women rule with men.'⁹ As Lawson became more embittered, he began to blame women for the shortcomings he saw in himself and the world. The rhetorical fervour of early days, 'when the world was wide' and women would join the revolution with men toward an egalitarian republic, gradually eroded into the bitter recriminating verse and prose of a defeated man, who along with warders and gaolers, would lead a revolution within capitalism against women. The idea of Woman, idealized into a symbol of hope or objectified into a figure of failure, permeates Lawson's writing. It also affects the critical and biographical writings about Lawson-as-a-cultural-object. Critics in their commentaries on Lawson's personality and writing rely on masculine/feminine dichotomies to assess strengths and weaknesses in Lawson and the national character. There are common assumptions underlying the concepts of masculinity and femininity employed in the commentaries on Lawson which are shared by critics across a range of ideological perspectives.

So, in 1918, when Lawson was reduced to writing doggerel to provide advertising copy for Heenzo cough syrup as a means of supporting his considerable appetite for beer, his friends at the *Bulletin* were preparing a new edition of his selected verse. The preface to the volume, written by David McKee Wright, provides a legendary tribute to the poet and a fulsome assessment of his achievement which survives to this day. In the preface, Wright fused the idealized image of the noble bushman associated with Lawson's 1890s writings with a new idealized image of the soldier returned from the Great War. Here is what Wright had to say:

*Lawson has lived the life that he sings, and seen the places of which he writes; there is not one word in all his work which is not instantly recognised by his readers as honest Australian. The drover, the stockman, the shearer, the rider on the skyline, the girl waiting at the sliprails, the big bush funeral, the coach with flashing lamps passing at night along the ranges, the man to whom home is a bitter memory and his future a long despair; the troops marching to the beat of the drum, the coasting vessel struggling through blinding gales, the great grey plain, the wilderness of the Never Never—in long procession the pictures pass, and every picture is a true one because Henry Lawson has been there to see with his eyes and heart.*¹⁰

This paragraph, which enumerates the themes in Lawson's writings, establishes his credentials as the authentic voice of Australia, which is the voice of the bush. It also registers the familiar themes of the bush adventurer, caught between hope and despair, measuring his grit against a threatening landscape, where

women wait. And it sounds the drum of troops marching, linking the bushman with the soldier, an idea Wright expands in his next paragraph:

When in April 1915, Australians made the historic landing at Gaba Tepe, the unexpected world saw young soldiers from a peaceful Commonwealth bearing themselves in the stress of war like veterans of the older fighting nations. The spectacle arrested and surprised. But Lawson had sung of these things more than twenty years before. Nothing Australians did in Gallipoli, or later in the fields of France, was new or strange to those who remembered the bugle note of his early poems. With prophetic insight he had dreamed a people's dream—had felt in that soldier-heart of his early manhood the tremor of a coming tempest, though the world skies were then clear—and had foreknown with every fibre of his being the way in which men of the bush and the mountain and plain would respond to the battle-call.¹¹

This paragraph links Lawson's radical, nationalist, republican sympathies of the 1890s with the conservative, Anglophile, imperialist demands of Empire in the Great War. Although the bush ideals embodied in the national character had been previously associated with the 'true' Australian, the manipulation of this image after the war indicates the ease through which the national character could be defined within the needs of Empire.¹² In the period between 1850 and 1890, which Lawson depicted in prose, Britain needed wool and wheat, which Australia supplied by taming the bush. In the 1914—1919 period, Britain needed soldiers, and the image of the bushman was transformed to suit the demands of a new era. The flag of revolution became the flag of Empire. Both conservative and socialist interests were served by the common image of the bushman-cum-digger. One doubt which had been expressed concerning the bush hero had been the question of his capacity for self-discipline (a question which, as we have noted, was registered in the writings of the Democratic Nationalists in relation to the gold-rush era as an adolescent phase of national maturity). Now at Gallipoli it seemed that the digger had proved himself. The idealized virtues of the bushman became manifest once again, this time in the figure of the digger as the archetypal Australian—and Wright's preface names Lawson as his prophet.

The preface then paints an intimate picture of Lawson, emphasizing his allegiance to the Australian common man:

He lives his life in Australia still—a life very close to ours, yet remote and lonely as that of genius is wont to be. London called to him, and he left us for a while, but came back more Australian than he went away. You meet him in the street and are arrested by his eyes. Are there such eyes anywhere else under such a forehead? He has the softened speech of the deaf, but the eyes speak always more than the voice; and the grasp of his hand is brotherly. A great sense of sympathy and human kindness is always about him. You will not lightly forget your first meeting. A child will understand him better than a busy city man, for the child understands the eternal language of the heart written in the eye; and Australia, strong-thewed pioneer though she be, has enough of the child left in her to understand her son.¹³

Genius, gentleness, sincerity, brotherhood, innocence—all the romantic virtues of the pioneering Australian artist are here parcelled up for public consumption. They are attached to a man who at the time of writing had been in gaol five times (on charges of assault and non-payment of child support), where he spent 197 days, and had just returned from a convalescent home where friends, and Lawson himself, hoped he could emerge from the blur of alcoholism to 'polish up a few poems'.¹⁴ Wright sympathetically invokes Lawson's presence by reference to his sensitive eyes, his softened speech, and his brotherly handshake. These attributes relate to events in Lawson's early life which are said to have marked his outward appearance and personality. He had been deaf from the age of nine, and shortly thereafter, was deeply affected by the death of his younger sister. In his youth the schoolchildren named him 'Barmy Harry', and chided him for his introversion and sensitivity. The outward signs of those debilitating events are romantically idealized in Wright's preface as hallmarks of his stature as Australia's pioneering creative artist. By 1918 the grasp of his hand was more shaky than brotherly; and his eyes, in which women had often read signs of vulnerability, spoke the language of defeat.

Critics variously interpret these personal attributes as indicative of feminine weakness or a poetic sensibility (which can of course amount to the same thing). That which is deemed 'weak' in Lawson's writings and in his personality is handled in one of three ways by his critics and commentators: it is muted, as in the case of David McKee Wright; it is attributed to heredity and blamed on the instability of his maternal ancestors; or it is attributed to his environment and traced to the unsympathetic attitudes of his mother and wife. These are some of the complex issues elided by Wright's fulsome praise; issues which would occupy the minds of critics for generations and make 'Henry Lawson' an industry in Australian culture.

Wright's preface, in these three short paragraphs, introduces a number of important issues of relevance to this study. Firstly, he locates in Lawson's writings a source of ideas about an authentic Australian culture through the selection of themes which become associated with the national identity. Secondly, Wright fuses the noble bushman and digger soldier into a common character type, a fusion which demonstrates how national identity as a construct can be moulded to suit the changing needs of dominant interest groups. Thirdly, he identifies Lawson as the founding subject, the origin of the voice of Australia, through the evocation of Lawson's personal presence in the text, a strategy which also will be reiterated through time to suit the values and beliefs of the dominant culture.

Despite changes in emphasis and attitude within the discourse on Lawson and the Australian tradition, a central and abiding issue for the critics is an interpretation of Lawson's character formulated with reference to masculine/feminine dichotomies. But the evolving discourse will establish academic reputations, foster critical debate and encourage scholarly adventurers. And although the 'idea' of Henry Lawson is an invention of writers, artists, critics and historians located mainly in the academy, it becomes a commodity widely circulated through the culture and put to social, political and economic uses. Still the competition to define the 'real' Henry Lawson, 'the first articulate voice of the real Australian', remains tied to the primary desire of Western man to name and thus master the illusory and undecidable construct called the self.

There is one final irony associated with the 1918 publication of Henry Lawson's *Selected Poems* to which Wright attached his influential preface, which Denton Prout has called an 'almost legendary vision'.¹⁵ It appears that George Robertson, Lawson's publisher, was concerned about the uneven quality of much of the poet's verse. He wanted the poems revised for publication. After six months of apparently unsuccessful correspondence with Lawson, he turned the task over to David McKee Wright, who proceeded to 'improve' the poems by eliminating stanzas, rewriting lines, altering rhyme and diction.¹⁶ The edition, which included forty-eight poems, 70 per cent of which had been written prior to 1900, resulted in a literary production of bowdlerized verse, the changes of which remained undetected until Angus and Robertson published Colin Roderick's memorial edition of Lawson's collected verse in 1967—8. And David McKee Wright, himself a poet born in Ireland, had a literary reputation for writing 'not like an Australian at all ... but like an Irishman straight out'.¹⁷ These facts add an extra dimension to the discussion of origins for a nationalistic culture detailed in Chapter Two and the statement that 'there is not a word in all his work which is not instantly recognised by his readers as honest Australian'.

Within four years of the publication of *Selected Poems* Henry Lawson would be dead. But the idea of Henry Lawson and the canon of his works had already been revived. Henry Lawson-as-cultural-object would be enlisted into the debates on the national character which continue through the twentieth century. Lawson becomes the code, the founding father, the voice of Australia. But the character of this voice will undergo dramatic changes as it is moulded to suit changing social, political and economic requirements.

The focus of this study is the place of 'woman' in the Australian tradition. Lawson and the Australian character are decidedly masculine concepts. But identity-as-masculine-sameness defines both what it valorizes as male and represses as female. Wright's preface names Lawson as the authentic voice of the bush and of Australia. It locates in his writings the Australian character as common man who is nonetheless susceptible to a variety of forms of historical revision. It also, and at the same time, posits a reality intimately present in the man himself. The three emblematic paragraphs cited above refer to women only once and in the singular, as a character in Lawson's fiction, 'the girl who waits at the sliprails'. The text, however, maintains the metaphor of woman as (m)otherland. It personifies Australia as a mother to Lawson: 'strong-thewed pioneer though she be, [who] still has enough of the child in her to understand her son'. Although

woman is muted, the preface still participates in a specifically Australian signification of the feminine, as do subsequent studies which reiterate these themes.

Women in Lawson's Fiction

In Lawson's stories and the poems which they parallel, women are constructed to represent a number of physical and psychological dilemmas for man in the bush. For example, they frequently appear as idealized symbols of hope or are objectified into figures of defeat. Their displacement into feminine metaphors for the bush follows a similar pattern—although, in both cases, instances of defeat far outnumber those of hope. In addition, woman's status, as well as that of the imagined landscape, is perceived in relation to men.

Titles of the stories in which women feature indicate the degree to which Lawson imagined women as appendages to men. For example, women are named in relation to men. The titles of his stories attest to this habit of thought, as in 'His Mother's Mate', 'The Drover's Wife', 'The Selector's Daughter', 'His Adopted Daughter', 'The Shanty-Keeper's Wife', 'Brighten's Sister-in-Law' and 'The Pretty Girl in the Army'. Or, women are signaled as curious objects on whose behalf men have the authority to speak, as in 'Mitchell on Women ... on Matrimony ... on the "Sex" and other "Problems" ... on The Sex Problem Again'. Or, the title announces that men have the authority to speak for silenced or absent women, as in 'Telling Mrs Baker', 'She Wouldn't Speak', and 'No Place for a Woman'. Lawson's stories by title indicate that there is no question but that women 'belong' to men.

As characters in the fiction, women parallel man's dilemma in the bush, poised between hope and defeat. Occasionally, and primarily in Lawson's early writings, women are imagined as symbols of hope, which have a positive influence on men. The bush, as well, takes on these feminine attributes. The early explorers' visions of landscape, like that of Stokes who saw the Arcadian plains as 'Plains of Promise', are recognized in Lawson's early verse which imagines Australia as 'a garden full of promise', a 'common garden' for pastoralists and laborers alike, and an 'Eldorado ... beneath the Southern skies' for the diggers in poems like 'Freedom on the Wallaby', 'Triumph of the People', 'The Southern Scout' and 'Roaring Days'.¹⁸ But already lurking in the garden of Lawson's poetry is the snake of capitalist greed, which in another time had made of England a 'hell in Paradise'.¹⁹ That snake in the garden will later be employed to signify the threat of (feminine) otherness, as in 'The Drover's Wife' and 'The Bush Undertaker'. In the poetry when bushmen's aspirations give way to actual experience, the land takes on harsh attributes, like those noted by Vance Palmer, of a cruel mother—'an enemy to be fought'. The funereal qualities of the vast waste land, recognized by Marcus Clarke, enter Lawson's verse in praise of pioneering settlement. In 'How the Land was Won', Lawson writes:

*The darkest land 'neath a blue sky's dome,
And the widest waste on earth;
The strangest scenes and the least like home
In the lands of our fathers' birth;
The loneliest land in the wide world then,
And away on the furthest seas,
A land most barren of life for men—
And they won it by twos and threes.*

He tells of the struggles of exploration and settlement and death and birth in desolate huts:

*That's how the first were born to bear
The brunt of the first man's curse!²⁰*

The first man's curse, the curse of Eve, exists as a contrapuntal force throughout the poetry and prose. The curse, embodied metaphorically in women, is said to operate against man's attempts at heroism.

In Lawson's early stories and verse, written between 1891 and 1899, the idealized Arcadian bush of the past begins to give way to an experienced barren wilderness. Paradise erodes into Hell as the greed of the capitalist system infects the garden of republican hopes. Women are represented as its victims, but they

function as foils for man's heroic actions. But both the bush and women are the raw materials on which men act and through which they attempt to realize their identity as bushmen. The female characters in Lawson's early stories mostly live in the city: 'a great city of shallow social sham, of hopeless, squalid poverty, of ignorant selfishness, cultured or brutish, and of noble endeavour frowned down or callously neglected'.²¹ Women's victimization is measured against the harsh urban environment. As they move into the bush, they themselves, like the land, become an alien force against which man must struggle. Only now, the struggle is not against the greed of the city as an objective social force, but against the unspeakable subjective fears of melancholy, despair, defeat and madness, which the land and women represent discursively as threats to masculine identity.

In any season, the bush for Lawson is an annihilating force. His descriptions signify the maddening qualities of the landscape as imagined through the beleaguered eyes of the battling bushman. In the dry season it appears as 'barren', 'raw', 'parched' and 'sun baked' with 'hungry, wretched selections' and 'scenery that looks better when the darkness hides it'. In the wet season it can be even worse: 'general rain ... and there began the long, long agony of scrub and wire fence ... even more dismal than the funereal "timber" itself ... everything damp, dark, and unspeakably dreary ... all around suggested death ... [with] naked white ring-barked trees standing in the water and haunting the ghostly surroundings.'²²

Female characters personify the disintegrating influence in the bush. They become metaphors for defeat, succumbing to exhaustion, despair and death, as they mirror man's dilemma. 'The Selector's Daughter' introduces this theme. At seventeen, the girl, we are told, looks like an old woman in her 'faded dress' and 'ugly, old-fashioned hood'. 'Oh, if I could only go away from the bush!' she moans. Being a woman, she cannot escape the bush/her fate as easily as the males in her family have done. She keeps the house in order through her mother's long and fatal illness while her father spends long weeks away. He returns, drunk and abusive, with a stolen steer. After his arrest and that of her brother the daughter becomes 'nervously ill ... nearly mad'. She is the girl who waits at the sliprails, to whom David McKee Wright referred in his preface to Lawson's poems. But she greets only a father returned with a new woman who beats the daughter in a drunken rage and sends her away—to suicide. The daughter, persecuted by her loneliness in the bush, her mother's death and a 'weak' father with his abusive new wife, jumps from a granite cliff into a deep but rocky waterhole.²³ She, rather than the bushman, succumbs to despair. Maggie in 'Babies in the Bush' is another crazed woman, driven insane by the disappearance of her children while her husband was away on a drinking spree.²⁴ The bush, it seems is 'no place for a woman'.

In Lawson's fiction generally female rather than male characters go mad in the bush. Many bushmen succumb to madness or suicide offstage, so to speak, but generally they are mentioned only in passing. But there are two significant exceptions to this tendency which are worthy of note. One is Ratty Howlett, the crazed selector in the story actually named 'No Place for a Woman'. Ratty imagines that his wife is still with him, years after she has passed away—a victim of loneliness, isolation and death during an unattended childbirth. Ratty Howlett, as a mad bushman, is an interesting case. His name connects him to a series of signifiers in Lawson's bush stories. 'Ratty' is an Australian colloquialism for odd, eccentric, beyond the border of sanity. The name also associates him with the animal world, and on a lowly rung at that. His surname, 'Howlett', extends the signification of his mad dilemma and connects it with the landscape (as in the bush as 'a blasted, barren wilderness that doesn't even howl'). If the bush *could* speak, Lawson had suggested earlier in this description from 'Hungerford', it would howl. Ratty is a quiet man. But through his condition readers can imagine the threat the alien landscape poses to the native son. Another anomaly of Ratty Howlett's situation is that he lives alone—excluded from the masculine bush community of mates. His fate has occurred in a setting called 'no place for a woman' which actually becomes no place for a man (the place of madness beyond a rational order). But the phrase 'no place for a woman' takes another twist in the story. The narrator relates that he was surprised to hear that Ratty at one time had a wife, 'thought he was a hatter', he says. A 'hatter' is a bush eccentric, a man who lives and works alone, gradually becoming so shy of human company that he avoids it—isolated in his madness from the social order. Hatters, by definition, never marry. This, in turn, helps to explain their condition of eccentricity. These codes of meaning illustrate how women, or the feminine counterbalance necessary to masculine sameness, preserve the semblance of identity within a human community. 'Bushmen stand in awe of sickness and death' (and madness too,

although the word remains unspoken), the narrator relates in this story.²⁵ To have become 'ratty' is indeed an awesome threat.

The other exception to the rule is the old shepherd in 'The Bush Undertaker'. He, too, lives alone, with the company of his dog, 'Five Bob', perhaps the archetypal hatter in Lawson's fiction. In a story long noted for its black humour, the shepherd discovers the dead remains of a man whom he imagines to be his lost mate, Brummy, while foraging in the bush on Christmas day. Identifying the corpse by the nearly full bottle of rum which lies at his side, the shepherd carts it home, all the time restless with unspoken fears provoked by the recurring presence of the 'great greasy black goanna' which reappears to disturb the 'weird and dismal' equilibrium of his erratic life in the bush. The goanna may be this story's threat of feminine otherness. It represents his disorientation from humanity in an absolute sense. There is not much hope for the bush undertaker. He is resigned to defeat. He murmurs to Brummy just before he delivers 'some sort o' sarmin' above the makeshift grave: "Brummy, ... it's all over now; nothin matters now—nothin did ever matter, nor—nor don't. You uster say as how it 'ud be all right termorrer' (pause); 'termorrer's come, Brummy—come fur you—it ain't come fur me yet, but—it's a-comin.'" ²⁶ This story with its representation of disintegration, alienation, loneliness and acceptance of defeat, borne with stoic eccentricity, concludes with the famous epitaph for 'the grand Australian bush—the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and of much that is different from things in other lands'.²⁷

The central character in this story has no name save that of 'the Bush Undertaker', which locates him within the preserve of the dead. He, like Ratty Howlett, lives and works alone, outside the community of mates. Ratty Howlett and the bush undertaker are rare figures in Lawson's fiction. They are bush eccentrics, exiled to a life without companionship. But their plight gives definition to the general condition of madness, isolation and death outside the constraints of the Father's Law—the ultimate threat of the bush. Although the bush is 'no place for a woman', nonetheless, a woman in a man's life is seen to preserve his identity and protect him from disintegration. Thus, when female characters succumb to madness, their condition poses a direct threat for man/Man. His fragile armour in this battle against the bush is mateship. Harry Heseltine, commenting on the stories of mad women in the bush, writes that mateship is practised not for its positive qualities but as 'a last line of defence against an uninviting, even hostile frontier'.²⁸

Within the tradition, however, women *are* the frontier. They stand on the border between sanity and madness, civilization and the wilderness. In each of these stories a relationship is established between the writer and audience. Together they form a bond against the threat of an alien and alienating environment. The primal fear that a mother might reject her child, or the bush might reject its inhabitants, is played out on the terrain of the feminine. Within a human community, women act out man's fears, becoming what Man is not (that is, insane, defeated or dead), what is not Man. The bond between teller and listener, like the bond of mateship between men in the bush, establishes a connection between men which mediates the alien threat. As readers, whether male or female, we enter that bond against the alterity of otherness imagined as a place beyond the Father's Law.

At the same time in Lawson's stories there is the sense that the fate of women lies in man's hands. He carries a burden of guilt for her inability to cope with the bush, which operates textually as a projection of his own. This is especially true in the sequence of stories concerning Joe Wilson. The stories tell of the courtship, marriage, gradual decline and eventual collapse of the union between Joe and Mary Wilson. As the stories progress, the ageing, disintegrating narrator attempts to understand the forces which destroyed the innocent, hopeful past. Brian Matthews details the sequence as one in which the characters move from alienation to disintegration within an indifferent, hostile and pitiless bush.²⁹ Mrs Spicer, in 'Water them Geraniums', stands at the edge of the frontier between sanity and madness. She is described as a 'gaunt and flat-chested' woman with a face 'burnt to a brick', 'wild looking eyes', and a 'lost groping-in-the-dark kind of voice'. Having coped with an absent and alcoholic husband, delinquent children, visiting swagmen who hang themselves, isolation and poverty, she has reached a stage 'past carin'. ' 'I'm gettin' a bit ratty' ' (like Ratty?), she tells Joe, shortly before she dies, ' "like a broken down horse." ' But she leaves instructions to 'water them geraniums', thus clinging, even at death, to the last remnants of civilization.³⁰ And Joe is shocked by the recognition that Mary, growing weary and indifferent, could suffer the same fate. About Mrs Spicer Matthews writes:

*She is a warning, not just to Mary but to all women, that their very personalities may be distorted, their characteristic femininity denatured, as deprivation, inadequacy, makeshift and longing take their physical, mental and spiritual toll; and that they may pass into a limbo where existence is not that of a woman or man, but one of confused, dissociated sensations— pain, nostalgia, bitterness, despair.*³¹

In a footnote he continues, ‘Spicer is a warning for Joe: he exists only as a gloomy, moody and bitter shadow of what he once was’.³² Matthews is a careful reader of Lawson from an existential perspective. He sees the stories as crises of consciousness. But he does not question where these constructs of ‘characteristic femininity’ come from. ‘Nature’ will suffice.

But masculinity and femininity are cultural constructs. Lawson's stories reinforce gender divisions with difficulty, not so much because women escape the categories (they seldom do) but because masculine identity is not secure. The bush threatens to reduce men to exhibiting characteristics which Western culture assumes are feminine: that is passivity, weakness, depression, despair and, finally, madness or death. These are threats to the human personality which can beset men, but in Lawson's stories they are more often projected on to and lived out in the lives of fictional women. The stories reveal the hardships of the bush on women who are confined to the home and family responsibilities which men can (and perhaps must) escape. The disintegration of women is a threat to men, quelled in the call to mateship.

Ratty Howlett and the nameless bush undertaker lost the community of mates in their battle with the bush. In their madness they ‘become’ women—tending house, making tea, entertaining their fantasies. Mrs Spicer's final words, ‘Water them geraniums’, which also form the title of the story, tether her as a woman, however precariously, to the masculine order of sanity. Madness is a condition named, explained and (necessarily) contained by phallogocentric culture to protect and preserve the identity of the self. The mad man is robbed of his selfhood—reduced to playing the role of the woman. The mad woman is robbed of her femininity, ‘denatured’ according to Matthews, as masculine property.

The bush as a frontier which poses madness against sanity, or loss of control against mastery of the self, is realized textually in a number of stories. In ‘Water them Geraniums’ when Mary tells Joe that ‘“I can't stand this life here. It will kill me!”’ Joe reflects, ‘“If I don't make a stand now ... I'll never be master. I gave up the reins when I got married, and I'll have to get them back again! ... What women some men are!”’³³ Mary's sanity is juxtaposed against Joe's mastery of the situation. If Mary can be restored to the masculine economy, in response to Joe's desire, she will be ‘saved’ by the structures of reason. Her ‘indifference’ (a term used to describe both Mary and Mrs Spicer) makes her enigmatic, inaccessible, impenetrable—an intolerable state within the male economy. This brings us back to an earlier discussion of women in the bush—the bush is both no place for and the place of woman as she stands within and also challenges the required masculine representations of femininity. Women and men, when they disintegrate into madness, chaos or disorder on the landscape of the bush, become the bushman's enemy: the ultimate threat to his identity.

Lawson had addressed the threat of this sort of fragmentation before. In ‘Mitchell on the “Sex” and other “Problems”’ (1898—9) two mates ponder over the complex social and economic problems of the day. Mitchell believes they all have their origin in man's first curse, the curse of Eve, or, the sex problem. I will quote the introductory remarks of his speech at length, italicizing the text to note the sliding signification of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’ ‘you’ and ‘they’ which mark divisions between universal humanity, males and females and the categories of inclusion and exclusion assumed. Mitchell explains:

There's no problem, really, except Creation, and that's not our affair; we can't solve it, and we've no right to make a problem out of it for ourselves to puzzle over, and waste the little time that is given us about. It's we that make the problems, not Creation. We make 'em, and they only smother us; they'll smother the world in the end if we don't look out. Anything that can be argued, for and against, from half a dozen different points of view—and most things that men argue over can—and anything that has been argued about for thousands of years ... is worse than profitless, it wastes the world's time and ours, and often wrecks old mateships. It seems to me the deeper you read, think, talk, or write about things that end in ism, the less satisfactory the result; the more likely you are to get bushed and dissatisfied

with the world. And the more you keep on the surface of plain things, the plainer the sailing—the more comfortable for you and everybody else. We've always got to come to the surface to breathe, in the end, and in any case; we're meant to live on the surface, and we might as well stay there and look after it and ourselves for all the good we do diving down after fish that aren't there, except in our imagination. And some of 'em are very dead fish too—the 'Sex Problem', for instance ... [emphases mine]³⁴

After this long, rambling, somewhat obscure introduction, Mitchell specifically mentions a few of the 'isms' of the day which divide 'us'. Socialism, capitalism, spiritualism and unionism are referred to. That is, everything but the central problem to which this passage and the story, 'Mitchell on the "Sex" and other "Problems"', builds and which is clearly the main concern—feminism. Soon enough Mitchell mentions the culprit: the 'notoriety-hunters' who take men to court 'for maintenance and breach of promise cases', ... 'the rotten "sex problem" sort of thing', which, he says, is 'the cause of it all; it poisons weak minds—and strong ones too sometimes'.³⁵ If we deconstruct this argument, what Mitchell is telling Joe, and the readers too, through a bond of 'mateship' which is the bond of masculine resemblance against the feminine other, is that sexual divisions are natural and ordained by God through Creation. God and Christian morality become the source and origin of Mitchell's authority. But the text reveals how sexual divisions exist in the logic of phallogocentric discourse which names God as the source and origin of Truth and also makes possible Mitchell's position of authority over the 'problem' of women.

Who are the 'we's' to whom Mitchell refers? Let us trace the logic of the argument. We [men and women within the masculine economy] cannot solve the problem of sexual divisions (which is 'no problem, really'). But 'we' [men and women, but mostly women] have no right to make a problem over it for 'ourselves' [men and women, but mostly men]. It is worth pointing out here that the women who were being urged by Mitchell not to make a problem of sex differences could include Louisa Lawson, Henry's mother and founder of the first feminist newspaper, *The Dawn*, which brought 'the sex problem' to public notice, and Bertha Lawson, his wife, who persuaded Henry to enter the Inebriates Home for six weeks during the year this story was written and worried over debts to the landlord as she sat at home each night with two small children while Henry frequented the Dawn and Dusk Club with his bohemian mates. 'We' [men and women, but mostly women] make the problems, and 'they' [the problems, but also women] 'only smother us'. At this point in the argument, the problem becomes both 'sexual divisions' and 'women', as the spur of Mitchell's dilemma. Later, Mitchell will shift some of the blame to men, because they have allowed women to dominate. He says:

It was Eve's fault in the first place—or Adam's rather, because it might be argued that he should have been master. Some men are too lazy to be masters in their own homes, and run the show properly; some are too careless, and some too drunk most of the time, and some too weak. If Adam and Eve hadn't tried to find out things there'd be no toil and trouble in the world today; there'd have been no bloated capitalists, and no horny-handed working men, and no politics, no free trade and protection—and no clothes. [emphases mine]³⁶

Therefore, the complex social, political and economic problems of the day in Mitchell's naive romanticized reasoning can all be traced back to Adam and Eve. And the worst effect is that 'the sex problem' (etc.) 'wrecks old mateships'. Ironically, and at the same time, mateship is the status which both promotes and protects the bushman from 'the sex problem', while it both makes possible and denies woman's position of authority in the home of the absent father.

Critics of Lawson are somewhat embarrassed by these harangues of Mitchell's and their misogynistic biases. But the assumptions which make this argument possible have been present in Lawson's writings and beyond them within the Australian tradition from the outset. The views, which are not necessarily Lawson's, operate within the logic of a masculine culture. When men fail 'to run the show properly', that is, within the assumptions of male dominance and female submission, they are judged to be and sometimes see themselves as 'weak', 'careless' and 'lazy'. That is, they become lesser males taking over attributes within the category of the feminine. They turn to their mates in the pub or the bush to create an illusion of power through male bonding.

As Mitchell continues his argument, he says that the more you [men and women, but mostly men] think on the problem the more likely you [men] are to get bushed. To get bushed, within the Australian tradition, is to lose one's bearings, to get lost in every sense, to fail to attain an identity against the landscape of the bush. The threats to identity, within the larger discourse, have been named as absorption, or resignation to melancholy, despair, madness, and/or death—'the terror at the basis of being'. The solution is to 'keep on the surface of plain things' (the logic of masculine sameness), and not dive down after 'fish that aren't there'. This latter phrase recalls the opening phrase 'there's no problem, really' which began this discourse on the evils of the world, reduced to evils of sexual division, or 'the sex problem (etc.)'. The problem, acknowledged through negation, becomes the imagined power of the controlling and castrating women. To stay on the surface is to exteriorise the self, that is, man, reason and speech in a 'proper', 'natural' order and to contain the threat which woman and the feminine pose to men and masculine selfhood of weakness or defeat in this 'unnatural' chaotic state in which 'men' can become 'women'.

All those mad women in Lawson's stories—the selector's daughter, Maggie Head, Brighten's sister-in-law and Mrs Spicer—exist as figures of defeat for man. But Mitchell's speech demonstrates that even the strong bush pioneer women, the drover's wife, for example, can pose a threat to man's identity through their dominance within the family. Although they preserve male authority within the domestic space, they also can and do become unified with the hostile environment against which man battles. Within different webs of signification the bush and bush women form a frontier for man between sanity and madness, unity and disintegration, proper and improper spheres, which man must solve by mastery. The final refuge, when both consciousness and the 'proper' social world have apparently broken down, is the authority of language, the symbolic order and the Father's Law. Discourse constitutes the self. The designation of male strength and female weakness, male dominance and female submission, male activity and female passivity, are constructions of a masculine symbolic order assumed to be natural facts or truths ordained by God. When this order is disrupted it is seen to be the fault of women. So, when Mitchell and his mates lament about their failures to master women, and therefore master themselves, their misogyny relies on the authority of 'God' or the 'natural order' as the context which frames the argument. Male dominance may fail in the individual case history; but its authority is upheld in the symbolic order.

When critics search through Lawson's works for the character who personifies the 'ideal' bushman, who battles bravely and does not succumb to the hostile, anti-human threat of the bush, they generally settle on Mitchell. Colin Roderick calls Mitchell the 'homespun philosopher' who comes closest to being Lawson's 'ideal projection'.³⁷ Manning Clark sums him up in the following way:

By the end of 1893 Mitchell had been launched on the world, at first as the man who was habitually one-up on all competitors. He was the man with whom Australians could identify, because Mitchell by his very Australianness always came out on top. In recognizing their self-image in Mitchell, Lawson was not only making Australians aware of themselves, but giving them a self-confidence. Mitchell was the larrikin streak in the Australian: in time Lawson would also fill in that part of the Australian bushman and bushwoman which had more in common with the saint. In time, too, Mitchell would be the medium through whom he would tell the world something of his vision of life, of how those who had endured the hardships of the Australian bush knew about 'the power and the glory' as well as shame and degradation.³⁸

(All Australians? Who speaks, for whom, and by what authority?) There are many Mitchell stories. In them women are not always the alien other against which the bushmen must struggle—sometimes it is the boss, or the bush, or the city. But, always, the threat is subdued by what Clark calls one-upmanship. Mitchell's 'self-confidence' is won by boasting, by asserting the demands of the male-as-underdog against 'unnatural' threats which assault and challenge his deserved status. Often, as in 'Mitchell on the "Sex" and other "Problems"', the source of his mastery of self-presence depends primarily on the phallogocentric operations of language.

The bushwoman as saint, to whom Clark refers, must undoubtedly be the drover's wife. She is the woman to whom both Hancock and Clark refer in their histories of Australia as an authentic representation of women in the bush and whom Summers recognized as the classic 'coper', idealized as the bush Mum

(discussed in Chapter Three). All Australians know her. As children they read her story in school. As adults they encounter it more often than any other story in anthologies of Australian prose. Lawson must have loved her, because she helped to make his reputation in England. Edward Garnett, the British critic, from whom Nettie Palmer took her lead in assessing Lawson as the 'voice of the continent', had this to say about 'The Drover's Wife': 'If this artless sketch be taken as the summary of a woman's life, giving its meaning in ten short pages, Maupassant has never done better.'³⁹ We can trace Lawson's literary reputation, as it changed to suit the needs and attitudes of the times, by reading what various critics have had to say about this literary figure.

Lawson Criticism: The Uses of the Feminine

In the early decades of the century, when Lawson's prose was deemed 'authentic' by sympathetic reviewers, his 'realistic' short stories were judged to be representative, photographic and sincere.⁴⁰ In the 1920s, Australia entered a conservative phase. As Richard White explains, 'the bush and the bohemians were sobered up, made respectable and reinterpreted to stand for the new bourgeois values associated with the new nation, for the new ideals which needed protection.'⁴¹ For the most part, critics begin to challenge Lawson's bush as unrepresentative, morbid and brooding. But what they deem undesirable in the fiction, they attribute to failings in the personality of the artist. Further, the form of chastisement relies on an understanding of masculine/feminine dichotomies. Lawson is depicted as weak, womanish and unmanly when his writings no longer conform to the nation's dominant idea of itself. In 1922 A. G. Stephens wrote that Lawson saw the bush 'through the distorting glass of his own moody mind'. But Stephens blames what he sees as an idiosyncratic fault of the artist on Lawson's 'feminine' weakness. Stephens' quotation continues: "'My aunts said I should have been a girl," he wrote. His womanish wail often needs a sturdy Australian backbone.'⁴² The quote, taken from Lawson's autobiographical writings, illustrates how Lawson took on to himself the negative connotations of feminine sexual identity as an explanation for aspects of his personality which differed from the rigid masculine norms of his time.

The 1920s was an era when the concept of the purity of the race was enlisted to stand against the Yellow Peril. It was a time, according to White, when 'the bohemian image of the outback was reduced to wattle, sunshine and "White Australia".'⁴³ Lawson-as-a-cultural-object became the site of an ideological battle among critics intent on bolstering the national image. The bush, through the symbol of the wattle, came to represent the land of joy and wholesomeness. Fred Davison, editor of the monthly journal *Australia*, complained that 'Lawson failed most abjectly to sense that joy and to give it expression.' He 'didn't know Australia—not the real Australia—and couldn't write about it'.⁴⁴ But, although critics severely chastise Lawson for his 'woeful' portrayal of bushmen, the drover's wife is spared.

After the Great War, the culture enlists Lawson into the cause of mature nationhood in terms echoing those of David McKee Wright's 'almost legendary' preface. The gold-rush digger, the noble bushman, the Anzac soldier fuse into a single image of manly strength, independence and courage. During this era the industrialists, with their international connections to the United States, actively competed with the pastoralists to sell a new image of a wholesome, sane, pure and innocent Australia in league with the West, against the threatening, divisive, unhealthy, decadent and impure non-Western world. Working-class interests became divisive to the 'national' interests of the nation's middle class.⁴⁵

This ideological shift had several interesting effects on the cultural production of Australia. For example, films which depicted Australia's convict past and bushranging, as well as those which depicted drought, were banned from overseas distribution. In 1921 the Superintendent for Immigration appealed to travellers to monitor their speech while overseas. 'Such words as "drought" and "strike" and "rabbit" and "taxes" and "politics" should be thrown overboard as the vessels put to sea', he cautioned.⁴⁶ At the same time critics began to alter the image of Lawson. His bush becomes the terrain on which national pride is built. The drover's wife becomes a 'large and symbolic figure' who 'opened the eyes of other writers to what is really poignant and dramatic in the life around them'.⁴⁷ After both world wars, the image of manly toughness, 'born of the lean loins of the country itself', would unite the academic nationalists to their literary brothers of the 1890s.⁴⁸ And the drover's wife, though a woman, is seen to personify these traits.

With a shift of national interests away from the bush and towards the city, away from particular forms of working-class republicanism and towards a so-called universal middle-class culture, Lawson and the literature of the 1890s also underwent a reinterpretation. Harry Heseltine announced the new theme in his ironically titled essay, 'Henry Lawson: Our Apostle of Mateship'. He suggested that the popular vision of 'a happy band of brothers marching bravely forward to a political and social utopia, united in their hatred of tyranny, their love of beer, their rugged manliness and independence' is a façade which does justice to neither Lawson nor the Australian character.⁴⁹ He and critics who agreed with his modernist stance argued that the tradition as represented by the Democratic Nationalists was parochial, not universal; representative of the bush, not the city; the working class, and not the middle class; the ignorant common man, and not his educated brother; the raw experience of man, and not his metaphysical soul.⁵⁰ It is Heseltine who first notes the nihilistic tendencies in the tradition which Lawson fathered. He restated his case in the essay 'The Literary Heritage' (1962):

*The canon of our writing presents a façade of mateship, egalitarian democracy, landscape, nationalism, realistic toughness. But always behind the façade looms the fundamental concern of the Australian literary imagination. That concern, marked out by our national origins and given direction by geographic necessity, is to acknowledge the terror at the basis of being, to explore its uses, and to build defences against its dangers. It is that concern which gives Australia's literary heritage its special force and distinction, which guarantees its continuing modernity.*⁵¹

Whereas earlier commentators had described the bush as a physical threat to man's identity, Heseltine imagined it as a moral, spiritual and existential threat. We traced this ideological shift from a nationalist to a modernist perspective in regard to landscape representation in Chapter Four. When this attitude was explored with reference to 'The Drover's Wife', as in Matthews' *The Receding Wave*, the story was described as one of 'ruthless pessimism' in which the woman confronts the bush as a 'common enemy' to men and women alike. Her life of hardships culminates in a 'sense of spiritual and emotional exhaustion'.⁵²

Colin Roderick is one critic whose views on Lawson and 'The Drover's Wife' have changed over time. In the 1960s Roderick described her situation as that of 'the self-sacrificing lonely life of the bushwoman who in those days helped to lay the foundation of our prosperity'.⁵³ This position aligns the author with the attitudes of the Democratic Nationalists. But in his recent study, *The Real Henry Lawson*, Roderick shifts ground. He cites 'The Drover's Wife' as Lawson's 'first short story of high quality' and maintains that the dominant note is one of melancholy.

*The bush suffered a change which reflected his own fears and insecurity. Nothing attractive, nothing lovely, nothing of good to report entered his portrait of it: it was all sinister and destructive. It developed from a mere background into an active alien force against which human fortitude spent itself until it was crushed.*⁵⁴

(We note that reference to the drover's wife as a woman is curiously absent; for Roderick in this instance the story is one of the bush and 'human fortitude' which is crushed. Actually the *snake* is crushed in the story. An interesting elision.)

But Manning Clark has another story to tell. For him, 'The Drover's Wife' presents to Australians an awareness of both a surface heroism and a metaphysical terror. He explains that the surface story tells of a wife's heroism and her sacrifice for her children, but underneath it all she confronts and conquers all the fears of despair and defeat which 'touched him [Lawson] deeply'. He proclaims, 'Lawson knew that her heroism, the halo of glory with which he endowed this bush mum, was of a high order'.⁵⁵

'The Drover's Wife', in the hands of the critics, has been a prized commodity for public consumption. The many interpretations which this story has received demonstrate both the evocative, symbolic richness of the text and the ways in which the story as a cultural object has been enlisted in the defence of dominant ideological perspectives concerning the nature of Australian culture. The commentators refer to 'The Drover's Wife' as a cultural entity in three ways. *As literature*, the story has grown from an artless sketch to a work of high quality. *As a figure*, the wife has been described as a tough dramatic individual symbolizing

courage and hope and also one of crushed fortitude exhibiting emotional and spiritual exhaustion. As *an image of the Australian character*, her situation reflects the nation's prosperity and its pessimism. The former depictions belong to writers associated with the Democratic Nationalists who share a Whig view of progress which celebrates the country's prosperity and initiative. In their view, the literature of the 1890s is described as realistic, although their representations of the national character reveal an allegiance to social Darwinism with its emphasis on heredity. The tough stock of transplanted Britons whom the drover's wife personifies produce for them a national type which will lead the country to maturity as an independent, strong and resourceful nation. Women are pioneers. They function as symbols of hope.

The later depictions emerge out of the writings of critics associated with the bourgeois modernists, whose anti-Whig sympathies deny a faith in historical progress. Their construction of the literature of the 1890s emphasizes the nihilistic, violent and irrational dark side of the Australian tradition. Their representation of the national character arises out of a modern social theory which investigates the forces of the environment. They decry Australia as a static nation, tied to world-wide economic and political realities which limit future growth. Nationalism as a concept has grown both 'sour and barren'.⁵⁶ Women personify the national dilemma. They function symbolically as figures of defeat.

Whether referring to Lawson's story, the figure of the drover's wife as an historical entity, or the woman as a dimension of the national character, the two sides of the argument depend on a series of dichotomies within Western thought. The debate contrasts the objective with the subjective; optimism with pessimism; reason with doubt; realism with romanticism. The former qualities are desired, while the latter are feared; the former associated with the masculine, the latter with the feminine within the critical discourse on Lawson and the Australian tradition. However, both the Democratic Nationalists and the New Critics embrace 'The Drover's Wife' in their attempts to define and master the national character. Could it be that for critics, who otherwise take up a variety of disparate positions, this figure represents 'the people's dream' of a malleable, pliant, non-threatening but phallic bush/mother?

A Re-Reading of 'The Drover's Wife'

A central problem for nineteenth-century explorers and settlers who confronted the bush was the dilemma of absence where presence was desired. Finding only a void, a wasteland, they invested the bush with visions of cultivation, noble cities, fruitful terrains, sheep and illimitable grasslands—all marks of man's progressive mastery. It is not surprising, then, to discover presence and absence as a dichotomy around which 'The Drover's Wife' revolves. In this story the husband is absent. His central role in the family has been taken over by the wife. Her dilemma is that the woodheap is empty. Its absence has been filled in by the presence of a snake. So, from the outset, the woman and the snake take up the space of absence. But the story, through woman, will serve to secure man's place in the bush and the Australian tradition.

The story calls for a closer re-reading. 'The Drover's Wife' tells the story of a woman's courage and fortitude within carefully delineated parameters of masculine discourse.⁵⁷ Her husband has been away, droving, for six months. He had once been a squatter with resources sufficient to take his wife to the city (in the more costly sleeping compartment) and furnish the family with a buggy. But his fortunes have declined. The vision of the land as a paradise for the common man has faded, and the bush, described as a flat plain of 'stunted, rotten native *apple* trees' (emphasis mine) where only the she-oaks sigh, serves as a reminder of woman's association with nature and man's lost Arcadian dreams. As the story opens, the woman emerges from the kitchen (her 'proper' sphere), which is separated from the hut and 'larger than the house itself, verandah included', in response to her children's cries that a snake has entered the woodheap and slid under the house. The first words of dialogue read 'Snake! Mother, here's a snake!' The phrase provides a visual code for the reader to identify the Snake with the Mother, through the suggestive placement of the words side by side and the rhetorical device of their capitalization. This sets up a series of links between the woman and the snake which is extended later when the wife tries to tempt the snake into the kitchen with two small dishes of milk. This narrative detail underlines the mother's role as both Eve, the temptress in league with the snake, and Mary as nurturer, the giver of milk. When the confrontation with the snake finally occurs at the climax of the tale, the mother 'sits as one fascinated' as she watches Alligator, the dog, who 'shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind'. In effect, Alligator replaces the absent husband here, performing the role of Adam, the first man to restore order in a post-lapsarian paradise.

Although these associations set up a chain of signifiers which link the woman to the snake, sin and nature, that is, woman as Other, another and more dominant set of associations exist to link the woman to Man. In terms of Lawson's imaginary ordering of the world, evidenced in his early verse, the snake in the garden of promise, before being named as woman, was called greed. It is exhibited here in the character of the blackfellow. We recall that the woman had bargained with a 'stray blackfellow' on the previous day to collect wood for her, and she had rewarded his initiative with 'an extra fig of tobacco, and praised him for not being lazy.' But he had built the woodheap hollow. Woman as Man stands against the blackfellow, the snake, the world's greed and the threatening bush. Her position appears to be secure within the masculine economy. She is innocent of guilt as the drover's wife; the blackfellow, the snake and the bush beyond connote guilt, greed, sin and death emanating from realms of the natural, animal and racially alien human worlds.

There are several signifying chains in the story which link the alien other with the native blacks, although the natives function ambivalently as a source of both good (when identified with the white settler's hopes) and evil (when seen to act against them). On the negative side of signification, when the snake first appears, Tommy, the eldest son, wielding club in hand, yells, 'I'll have the beggar', thus linking the snake as beggar with the first beggar, the Aboriginal native. When Alligator, the dog, grips the snake and pulls it into the kitchen, the snake is described as 'a black brute, five feet long'. This description, which directly follows the discovery of the hollow woodheap, built by a blackfellow who 'was the last of his tribe and a King', metonymically links the black snake/beggar/native with the forces of threat to white civilization. On the other hand, when the wife's last two (female and unnamed) children were born in the bush, and on one occasion when she was left unattended and ill as the husband struggled to bring the drunken doctor back to attend her, 'God sent Black Mary'. But Black Mary, midwife and witness to God's curse on Eve that she bring forth children in pain and distress, was 'the "whitest" gin in all the land'. Lawson's prose reveals an ideology of white, male, Anglo-Saxon culture which is as ambivalent to blacks in this instance as it can be to female characters elsewhere.

The woman's heroism is established textually through a flashback reminiscence structured to build suspense as she maintains her all-night vigil awaiting the confrontation with the snake. She has overcome both natural and living threats: bushfires, floods, cattle disease, raging bullocks, greedy crows and malicious swagmen—all part of the alien otherness of the bush. In these activities she acts in a masculine role as the pioneering hero. She even dresses in her husband's overalls on occasion to further mark her (borrowed) masculine position. Her pleasures as a wife and mother have been few: Sunday walks with the children for which 'she takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city', and prepared welcomes for her absent husband. The omniscient narrator (objective/masculine) assures us that she is content with her lot, although the children think she's harsh, despite her love. 'Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the "womanly" or sentimental side of nature.' But her words to the children, their Sunday behaviour, her sewing and her reading firmly establish her 'feminine respectability'. Thus, she is depicted as a woman of courage and fortitude within the domestic sphere who is also able to function in a masculine role when required. The point of view allows for no conflict between her 'self' and her maternal role. She is happy to protect the position of her husband, his property and the 'natural' social order of family life. The isolation of the bush, that 'everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees' which 'makes a man want to break away', she handles with a mixture of laughter and tears.

There is, however, considerable tension between the signification of the woman as the drover's wife, that is, associated with the self, and the woman, signified as other who stands in an inferior relation to man. In the story she is identified both as Man and not-man; hero and victim; self and other. Every one of her heroic feats is mediated by her limitations. For example, she tends the sheep but her husband's brother kills them and brings provisions. She quells the bushfire but has Tommy working 'like a hero' by her side while the baby 'howled lustily'. In this action the text establishes the drover's wife in a variety of contradictory roles. Dressed in overalls, she is the husband; with blackened arms, she is (and is mistaken by the baby as) the blackfellow; working with Tommy as the hero, she is inferior to man; in response to the baby's cries, she is the maternal mother. Despite all this, the bushfire 'would have mastered her' had it not been for the help of four bushmen. She saves the hut (private sphere) from flood but she could not save the dam (public sphere). 'There are things that a bushwoman cannot do.' She takes the children for bush walks but has

limited orienteering skills—only a bushman can fix a point. She confronts the snake with a ‘green sapling club’ while Tommy has a stick/club ‘bigger than himself’ (and he’s eleven). She kills the snake, holding Tommy back with ‘a grip of iron’, with the help of Alligator who provides the family with the voice, growl, surveillance, courage and protective behaviours of a husband—‘they couldn’t afford to lose him’. After the crisis she soothes the dog to reduce his anger and agitation. And despite her bravery, she cries a lot. In only one instance is her fortitude and courage unqualified. This is when we are told of how she rode nineteen miles for assistance on horseback carrying her dead child. She can be phallic as long as she is also, and above all, a maternal woman. This is a carefully constructed character, capable of being man and woman, phallic and maternal, hero and victim, Eve and Mary and also standing in the symbolic space of the other—the snake, greed, original sin, the blackfellow, nature.

When the crisis has passed and Tommy sees tears rising in his mother’s eyes, he hugs her and whispers a promise, “‘Mother, I won’t never go drovin; blast me if I do!’” Lawson leaves the mother and child coupled at the story’s end. Together they watch as the ‘sickly daylight breaks over the bush’. Her apparently manly sacrifice is rewarded by maternal love and domestic contentment. Order is restored out of chaos. Absence has been replaced by a plentitude called Woman.

It is difficult to comprehend how any commentator on ‘The Drover’s Wife’ could have maintained that it was an ‘artless sketch’, or a ‘realistic’, ‘photo-graphic’ depiction unless one accepts that the biblical primal scene, so enmeshed within the structure of the story, has become so ‘real’ for Western readers that its presence need not be acknowledged, and the sliding space of woman so naturalized that this fantastic creation can still seem convincingly real. The woman, the dog and the boy in this story all confront the ‘common curse’, Eve’s curse, the curse of original sin—that which separates civilization from the wild and barren wilderness, the self from the alien other which can be discursively linked with the ‘place’ of the feminine. No wonder that the woman watches the snake ‘as one fascinated’. But she confronts and conquers the alien threat, as a phallic mother, acting in the place of the (absent) father. And the son, already a ‘larrikin’ at age eleven, despite his promise (made through the discounting double negative that he ‘won’t never go drovin’) undoubtedly will follow his father, as a means of escape from the ‘maddening sameness’ of the bush/woman.

In addition, the drover’s wife, as Madonna (in the child’s eyes) or God’s police (in those of the wider society) preserves masculine authority, not only in the bush but for the nation. As long as she remains at home, tied to family but acting in both masculine and feminine roles, men can roam the bush where they often act like boys. In stories like ‘Rats’, ‘The Shearing of the Cook’s Dog’, ‘The Iron Bark Chip’ and countless others, the men on the land regress into childlike behaviour, idealized into ‘mateship’, while their position of authority is protected by the loved and feared—but mostly feared—bush Mum. When we investigate the drover’s wife as a cultural construction which comes to be seen as an authentic historical representation of women in the bush we can more fully understand how Manning Clark could maintain that her ‘halo of glory...was of a high order’.⁵⁸

‘The Drover’s Wife’ is often compared (favourably) with Barbara Baynton’s story, ‘The Chosen Vessel’, which will be examined in the next chapter. But ‘The Drover’s Wife’ occupies a central position in the Australian tradition, while Baynton’s story is labelled ‘dissident’. The reasons are not hard to detect. As we have discovered, the Australian tradition involves a struggle for a national identity against the otherness of the bush. The drover’s wife, as she confronts the danger of the snake, the blackfellow and the wilderness, stands on a terrain between sanity and madness, courage and defeat, physical strength and spiritual exhaustion. But she has an identity. She is the drover’s *wife*. She stands in his place, quelling the threat of feminine other, archetypically present in the form of the snake, by means of her phallic attachment. Her conquest of the snake signals the victory of the white presence over the bush. In this she, too, is a pioneering hero of the Australian tradition. Yet she maintains the distinctive marks of femininity, occupying both (privileged) masculine and (inferior) feminine positions within the culture’s gender order. This bush Mum, as an object in discourse, mediates the threats of feminine otherness for all readers, while at the same time preserving the space of the feminine other. She fulfills the people’s dream of the perfect mother—powerful, yet capable of being mastered herself, without a struggle. The perfect Australian fantasy.

A Search for Origins

Critics of Lawson have spent a great deal of time attempting to determine the source and origin of the story 'The Drover's Wife'. There are many contenders. Perhaps this is in part symptomatic of the evocative force of the fantasy and the ongoing desire to possess the perfect mother in reality. Anne Summers reports that the story belongs to Mary Gilmore, who related it to Henry Lawson. The event had happened to *her* mother, when Mary was six years old. Summers reports that Gilmore recalls her brother making the promise to her mother to 'stay home and take care of you', a version of which Lawson uses to bring his tale to a close.⁵⁹ But Colin Roderick disagrees, claiming that Lawson said the story 'was modelled on the life of his aunt, Mrs. Job Falconer'.⁶⁰ Denton Prout, one of Lawson's literary biographers, maintains that the incident of the raging bullock which the drover's wife remembers having killed, had actually happened to Lawson's mother, Louisa.⁶¹ Brian Matthews, commenting on the story in the light of previously unpublished autobiographical materials, suggests that the stories Louisa told to Henry as a child concerning her bush experiences, including the dangers of intrusive snakes and swagmen, provided the inspiration for the tale.⁶² The physical description of the drover's wife is said to resemble extant descriptions of Henry's mother.⁶³ But the most startling discovery, for those who search for empirical evidence on which to ground reality, is that announced recently by E. J. Zinkhan.⁶⁴ Zinkhan has located a previously unacknowledged item in the Lawson canon—an article written by Louisa Lawson in 1889, three years before the publication of 'The Drover's Wife', called 'The Australian Bush-Woman'. The article appeared in both an English and an American woman's magazine. Louisa's descriptions of the bush woman, her mode of life, her activities and her fear of madness bear a striking resemblance to her son's fictional representations. The critic recognizes that this discovery might pose a threat to the authority of Henry Lawson's tale. But she issues a caution: 'We must continue to be circumspect regarding the literary connection between mother and son, and particularly circumspect in our next question ... Did Louisa provide an influence on Henry's use of language in "The Drover's Wife?"' Textual comparisons between Louisa's essay and Henry's story reveal not only common themes but also 'recurring syntactical patterns' which the critic finds 'intriguing'.⁶⁵ There are differences, however, which Zinkhan delineates. The woman in Henry's story fears threats from the outside—the snake, the bush, the bushmen. But the bushwoman in Louisa's article can also fear her own husband who, if Australian, is likely to be lazy and domineering, and if European, violent and brutish.

There are a number of issues here. One, of course is the question of who speaks, for whom, and by what authority. Louisa speaks as the editor and feature writer of a feminist journal, *The Dawn*, to an international audience of women with whom she hopes to share an interest in women's rights. She ends her article with the following remarks: 'the iron strength of character, the patience, endurance and self-repression which the bush-women practised and developed, passing to a generation more enlightened and progressive, will give us a race of splendid women, fit to obtain what their mothers never dreamed of—women's rights.'⁶⁶ Henry speaks as a budding writer to a local audience of Australians with whom he hopes to share a belief in Democratic Nationalism. They have a different relation to their subject and audience and a different investment in the masculine economy. But both write from within a discursive network of meanings and ideological constraints which structure the debate on national identity. Louisa's text relies on the same Whig faith in progress and dependence on ideas adopted from social Darwinism regarding the strength of racial types, as do those of her son and the writers of the school of Democratic Nationalism he is said to father. But Louisa posits the nation's 'iron strength of character, ... its endurance ...' in the women who braved the hostile bush and contributed to the development of an enlightened and progressive society. She notes, however, that women had to practise 'self-repression' in the interest of national goals. Critics of Lawson will see these characteristics reflected in 'The Drover's Wife'. Within the Australian tradition, however, the drover's wife comes to represent not women's interests or strengths but those of a (masculine) national character. If men fail to exhibit the necessary characteristics desired for the country, then women can stand in their place, but at the expense of their difference within the masculine economy. They come to represent that economy. Louisa's article 'The Australian Bush-Woman' which contains a critique of the actions of men in the bush has been lost to history, while Henry's 'Drover's Wife' in which the benign husband is absent lives on.

Another issue is women's *access* to the tradition. Louisa's article, calling attention to attributes of the national character not entirely favorable to men, was published overseas. Despite considerable scholarly interest in all things Lawsonian, it remained undetected for nearly a century. The article which announces

the discovery appears in the final 'Notes and Documents' section of *Australian Literary Studies*. The same edition announces the discovery of some previously unpublished manuscripts of Henry Lawson by Brian Kiernan. A month later, Kiernan's 'scoop' discovery would be announced to the nation in blazing headlines on the front page of metropolitan newspapers.⁶⁷ Kiernan's 'scoop' would sell newspapers, boost the profits of the publishing industry, enhance an academic reputation and reify the authority of Henry Lawson as 'the first articulate voice of the real Australian'. Kiernan's discovery serves the 'national interest', whereas Zinkhan's dissident voice, like that of Louisa Lawson and the short stories of Barbara Baynton, might be divisive. The speaker's relation to power continues to shape and determine the discourse on the Australian tradition.

Is this why 'we must continue to be circumspect' concerning the relation between Lawson and his mother, Louisa? To be circumspect is to look at an issue from all angles. The issue here is the source for 'The Drover's Wife'. The critics want to determine whether it arises out of Lawson's genius, which is what the fuss is about, or Mary Gilmore's anecdote, or that of his aunt, or Louisa's life as told to her children through reminiscences. Any of these answers might be acceptable within the Australian tradition because they preserve the reputation of the artist as one who creatively fuses the material of his life history and imagination into fiction. To suggest that Lawson may have borrowed the idea from an article of his mother's and copied its themes and syntax endangers the writer's reputation for originality. What is at stake, finally, is Henry's originality as the true voice of Australia. Cautious critical circumspection is, indeed, needed to protect the space of his presence. Louisa's article has been and continues to be a muted element in the debate. For, to uphold the tradition, it is imperative that 'The Drover's Wife' be satisfied with her lot and that she *belong* to Henry Lawson.

Biographical Studies of Lawson's Personality

Who is 'Henry Lawson'—this absent centre around which national identity takes form? In recent years a number of articles and biographical texts have been produced which tell the story (or rather *stories*) of the man and his work, the man whom Vance Palmer called a 'portent' for the nation. There are at least five book-length biographies of Lawson as compared to only one full-length analysis of his writing. It is Lawson-the-man, to a far greater degree than Lawson-the-writer, who has been the subject of interest for scholars and readers alike. The genealogical history of the Lawson family's presence in Australia presents a fund of material to stir the literary and historical imagination. The details can be and have been structured in a way that reproduces the outlines of the Australian legend.

The historical discourse represents the family history according to a common pattern. There seems to be agreement among historians as to the broad outlines of the Lawson family in Australia. The narrative is presented according to these general outlines. Henry's maternal ancestors, John and Ann Ralph Albury, emigrated to Australia in 1838 after having been evicted from their cottage in Kent, where John worked as a hop farmer. Ann, known for her dark piercing eyes, was said to be descended from the gypsies. Although a supposition, this detail is recounted with regularity in the historical narratives. It is assumed that Australia, for this couple, symbolized a new hope for the landless poor of rural England. Their son, Harry, became a shopkeeper on the goldfields, where he was known as an 'incessant disturber of the peace'.⁶⁸ He married Harriet Winn, the daughter of either an English clergyman or a commercial traveller (the facts are obscure) who emigrated to Australia with her sister in 1848, to become a domestic servant. She becomes one of the army of 'God's police' whom Caroline Chisholm believed would provide the 'nucleus for the formation of a good and great people'.⁶⁹ Louisa Albury, Henry's mother, was born of this union. As a child she appears to have exhibited a great talent for poetry and music, writing verse at school and home and singing to the diggers in the pubs (but also in church!) in a strong soprano voice. Neither her mother, represented as demure and respectable, nor her father, described as boorish and domineering, encouraged Louisa's interests. At eighteen in 1866 she married Neils Larsen, a Norwegian sailor and handyman who had deserted his ship at Melbourne in 1855, drawn to the diggings and the elusive lure of gold. Henry Lawson was reputedly born in a tent on the Grenfell goldfields in 1867 (an assumption which Manning Clark adheres to but Colin Roderick refutes).⁷⁰ By this telling, Lawson has a 'classic' Australian heritage.

These are the background facts of history about which there exists a consensus among Henry Lawson's biographers. How they will interpret these facts, in their constructions of Lawson and his personality, will

vary. But like Lawson himself in later life, when they search for a scapegoat for Henry's failings, they tend to blame the women in his life. Brian Matthews' biographical study *Louisa* (1987) significantly shifts the tide of critical understanding towards a more sympathetic reading of her character. The text is, however, a study of Louisa, not Henry Lawson and thus does not alter the general critique forwarded here. Stephen Murray-Smith, in his short biography of Henry Lawson, is a rare exception.⁷¹ He reports that Louisa, upon marriage to Peter (as he preferred to be known) was a curious, independent and sensitive girl, who grew gradually resentful and unhappy in the isolation and dreariness of the bush. When her second child was born, during one of Peter's frequent absences, when she was left alone with two-year-old Henry, she vowed to leave the bush. She took up sewing as a means of supporting her plans. But as there was no Married Woman's Property Act, Peter forbade her to separate from him and used the money to buy a selection, but with the intention to dig for gold, not to farm. Louisa battled against insanity, escaping briefly to Sydney during her difficult third pregnancy, returning to the goldfields, regaining her strength and vowing to establish a school to guarantee the education of her children. But she had to convince her husband to represent her interests in the children's education, since the school's organizing committee would not allow women to attend the meetings. Murray-Smith reports that Louisa listened to their negotiations through a crack in the door. At the age of thirteen Henry helped his father to build the school. With Louisa's encouragement he also began writing poetry, which his father burned. In 1883, Louisa left the bush, moving to Sydney where she joined republican social and political circles, began publishing *The Republican*, and later, *The Dawn*. She arranged the publication of Henry's first book of poetry in 1894. Of her life in Sydney, Murray-Smith writes:

*she fought for prison reform, against 'ragged' schools, against gambling and drunkenness and against every manifestation of that spurious masculinity which still makes Australia one of the few places in the world where the man who deserts his wife and family is accorded a tough and ready sympathy among the community of men.*⁷²

This is a rare portrait of Louisa. Murray-Smith renders a consistently sympathetic interpretation of Louisa as a woman of strength and integrity who gave the encouragement which made Henry's writing career possible. Concerning Henry's personality, Murray-Smith writes that he was a sensitive and introverted youth who 'needed [his mother] a hundred times more than he needed his father but he always wished with one side of his nature to escape from the obligation by the quickest and most convenient route: to forget'.⁷³ Murray-Smith speculates that Henry's inability to resolve his debt to and reliance on Louisa drove him to the companionship of his mates at the pub. This is a far cry from the dominant tradition which most often takes its clues about Lawson's childhood and relationship with his parents from his short story, 'A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father'. The story is a retrospective autobiographical account of Henry's childhood begun about 1902 after the collapse of his marriage when, critics agree, he was 'in a most pitiable state'.⁷⁴ The story recounts his early childhood in a way that pits a nervous, unstable and insensitive mother against a patient, long-suffering and obliging father. Murray-Smith cautions that the story also positions the reader against the mother in a projection of her personality which is without historical accuracy.⁷⁵

But the tide of historical reconstruction would swamp the undercurrent of sympathy for Louisa which flows through Murray-Smith's biography. A majority of critics, including Desmond O'Grady, Denton Prout, Manning Clark and Colin Roderick, cite 'A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father' and Lawson's autobiographical reminiscences written between 1903 and 1922 as reliable, factual documents in their search for the 'real' Henry Lawson. All agree that there were strengths and weaknesses in Henry's character which would contribute to both his 'genius' and his disintegration. They attempt to reconstruct an essential personality, searching through the evidence selectively in order to explain his propensity for alcohol and slow decline. Some critics side with heredity, others with environment, as the source of the conflict—but all agree that the destructive influences on Lawson were feminine influences. Colin Roderick writes that Lawson had 'a brittle temperament ... inherited from unstable maternal ancestors [which] led him, as it led his Norwegian grandfather, into the deceitful refuge of alcohol'.⁷⁶ Manning Clark, who imagines a link between Lawson and Henrik Ibsen, blames the 'sins of the father', presumably drinking and debauchery on the goldfields (we remember the character type from Chapter Four), for Lawson's sensitivity, which resulted in his deafness. But he writes, in a somewhat contradictory fashion, that Lawson had 'a feminine mind in a masculine body', and later, 'a violent destructive person inside the gentle Henry Lawson'.⁷⁷ Throughout

the commentaries, the cultural categories of masculinity and femininity structure the arguments. Those characteristics found in Lawson's personality and deemed inappropriate for a man are called feminine and also blamed on actual women as their source. Clark's latest reminiscence appears in a thumbnail sketch of Lawson, commissioned for the coffee-table Christmas publication, *The Greats: the 50 Men and Women who Most Helped to Shape Modern Australia* (47 males and 3 females) which features an informal close-up photograph of Lawson on the dust-jacket.⁷⁸ In that article Clark again takes up the arguments concerning Lawson's weakness. He reiterates the opinion about Lawson that 'he should have been a girl' and adds other critical perspectives, including evidence of a repressed homosexuality, a spendthrift personality and the influence of British philistinism as reasons for his disintegration.

Critics who side with environment as the source of Henry's weakness generally begin with the marriage of Peter and Louisa. Desmond O'Grady represents Peter as a 'patient and kindly man', as he appears in 'A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father'. 'It was his misfortune', O'Grady continues, 'that his wife Louisa Albury was ambitious, intelligent, unaffectionate, interested in Spiritualism and potentially a crusading feminist.'⁷⁹ Life, he concludes, was Hell. Denton Prout reports that, 'Peter's dream of domestic bliss was shattered [when] he realised that his wife was a tartar, who had married not from affection but as a means of escape.'⁸⁰ Both Prout and Clark present a picture of Louisa Lawson as a domineering, manipulative, ambitious and unstable woman. She was 'impatient with the weak and foolish, that is, all those who opposed her', writes Prout.⁸¹ 'She was one of those women who was endowed by nature with an incurable itch to take charge of the lives of everyone she met. Those who liked to surrender control over their lives admired and adored her', writes Clark⁸² in the same vein. Embittered by a sense of deprivation, she was neither attentive nor affectionate to her children. Clark reports that 'this heightened [Henry's] native bent towards solitary brooding.'

The biographical accounts of O'Grady, Prout, Clark and Roderick all contain consistent harangues against Louisa, which are not only dependent on each other, but also, beyond the commentaries on Lawson, on stereotypic notions of woman as the source of the world's evil (that is, the deficiencies in men). And yet, these critics purport to be embarrassed by the misogynistic ravings of Mitchell in Lawson's stories. When they turn their attention to the marriage between Henry and Bertha Bredt they take their cues from the same pre-existent set of cultural assumptions. Only the stakes are larger—Henry's 'genius' is now the issue. Several critics report that George Robertson, Lawson's publisher, warned Bertha not to marry Henry. He cautioned, 'Henry Lawson is a genius and you know what geniuses are like—they never make a woman happy.'⁸³ It appears that everyone was against the marriage—and Bertha herself had her doubts.⁸⁴ But once she committed herself, this 'Gentlewoman', who 'was inclined to lay stress on gentility and the proper observation of etiquette',⁸⁵ persevered for six years with a man prone to instability, depression, drunkenness and abusive behaviour. Clark, who sardonically refers to both Bertha and Louisa, wife and mother, as 'fineflowers of puritanism' claims that she was deluded into thinking that 'her loving kindness and devotion could still the madness in his blood'. But, he chastises, 'She never paused to ask whether that would also destroy his genius.'⁸⁶ And Roderick, echoing O'Grady's theme and syntax in regard to the marriage of Henry's parents, concludes, 'It was unfortunate that his [Henry's] lot was to be linked with that of a woman who viewed her responsibility to her children as of prime importance. If Lawson were to fail as the family provider, she must be father and mother to them.'⁸⁷ (Why is it that the fictional drover's wife can be praised for these attributes while the historically constructed wife of Henry Lawson is damned for the same qualities? It seems that the deciding factor is the influence such behaviour is reputed to have on the husband.) Each of these critics in a variety of ways reads Lawson's character through assumed characteristics of Lawson's mother and wife which would be deemed appropriate, even praiseworthy, if found in a man. They then chastise the women for their 'faults' while absolving the men of blame. They conclude that the source of Lawson's weakness, even failure, was paradoxically the strength of the women in his life.

It only remains for the biographical critics to turn to Lawson's stories (but not 'The Drover's Wife') for reinforcement of the views. O'Grady proclaims that the central male characters in Lawson's fiction have all been *betrayed by women*:

Mitchell, Steelman, and the Oracle have all been betrayed by women ... the paradise of earlier days is lost; something fatally crippling had happened to the typical lonely figure

*of Lawson's Bush ... The trouble in each man's past was caused by a woman; and thus has affected their outlook and in turn the form of their stories.*⁸⁸

The flaws critics see in Lawson are also those which they attribute to his potentially noble bushmen characters. Paradise is lost, paralysis has set in. And, consistently, the source of man's failure is women. The supposed betrayals by women are cited as justification for the failures and inadequacies of men. These textual strategies, or phallic fictions as Lita Barrie calls them, parallel the sense of betrayal felt by men and blamed on the bush when it failed to answer man's needs and desires, which was registered in the last chapter.

What has happened to Henry Lawson, the poet-prophet who dreamed the people's dream? The terms of debate within the discourse on Lawson and the national identity have changed. One of the manifestations of this change can be registered with regard to conceptions about the role of the artist. The Democratic Nationalists construct the artist as a man of the people who authentically reflects their reality. Critics like Hancock, Ward, Palmer and Wright assumed in Lawson a strength which they saw depicted in the fictional struggles against an alien landscape. But for the New Critics, the artist is a genius, detached from society, who projects in his fiction the inner fears of man on to a metaphysical reality. Critics like Heseltine and Matthews and biographers like O'Grady and Clark assume that Lawson's bush is a psychological projection of his own idiosyncracies; his bushmen represent the sinister and destructive forces of modern man. But in both cases, 'Henry Lawson' serves to confirm their view of life. In their Lawson (or the author function they substitute for the man) the critics find their cultural and ideological beliefs confirmed. In every case the idea of 'the feminine' is enlisted as a threat which at the same time upholds the cause of masculine identity.

When Lawson's biographers trace his personal and creative decline, his unmanly weakness, they describe him not as representative, but unique. The difference can be registered in two essays by A. A. Phillips on Lawson. The first, written in 1948 and revised as the leading essay in the 1958 publication of *The Australian Tradition*, 'Henry Lawson as Craftsman', was the first critical essay to deal seriously with Lawson's talent as a writer. Phillips praises his 'developed technique'. In opposition to the prevalent critical view of Lawson as an 'artless', intuitive writer, Phillips asserts, 'his practice was too consistent, too closely allied to his artistic purpose, to be the fruit of happy accident or unguided intuition.'⁸⁹ But once Lawson's credentials as a craftsman are established, Phillips concludes that Lawson's highest value is that 'he could set down fairly what every bushman back of Bourke knew to be the truth'.⁹⁰

By 1966, with the intervening ascendancy of the New Critics and the biographical reinterpretations of Lawson's personality, Phillips modified his views. In 'Lawson Revisited' he writes, 'Lawson was not merely objectively delineating the New South Wales plains: he was projecting on to them the landscape of his own soul.'⁹¹ Far from representing the robust rebelliousness of the national spirit, Lawson's prose reflects the guilty sense of 'a defeated man's dark melancholy'.⁹² The problem, once again, is interpreted as women. Lawson could not resolve women's rejection of him (has Phillips been reading Desmond O'Grady, perhaps?) and the resultant alienation from his wife and mother. Failing to master the alien other, he succumbs to feminine weakness. Phillips writes, 'Furphy was right when he said that Lawson was *too feminine* ... [M]oreover ... Lawson was *indifferent* to the *virilities* of human response—too *indifferent* to achieve a *balanced* view of life' (emphases mine).⁹³ Eighty years of critical commentaries on Lawson and the national character reproduce the same tautological contradictions which plagued Lawson's own life. Man fails to attain an identity; his defeat leaves him with feelings of guilt. But Woman is the *source* of the guilt. If she (or the signifying force of the feminine) can be mastered, she could also be the source of man's redemption, but only by standing in an inferior or idealized relation to him. Lawson in the hands of his biographers is an effect of masculine/feminine categories.

When Henry Lawson began to slip into decline, his writings also blamed women and his 'feminine' personality for his personal and artistic failures. As we have seen in this chapter, the feminine, as a signifier of lack within the discourse on the Australian tradition, parallels the significance of the concept for Lawson. In Lawson's writings, as long as the alien other is a physical force, located 'out there', in the greed of the city, the boss and the natives, women stand as symbols of hope for man's conquest, through which he will attain a noble identity. But when the alien other is perceived as a psychological force, 'inside' in the form of melancholy, despair, defeat or madness, women stand as figures of defeat who personify what man fears—

that he will not attain authority, difference, self-presence, that is, identity. The bush as a garden full of hope which contains a snake to be crushed, becomes a barren, howling wilderness which contains the melancholy of a defeated man.

The critics of Lawson, depending on the social, economic and political requirements of the age and the speaker's relation to the dominant discourse of the day, have found in his writings evidence of manly strength and feminine weakness, national prosperity and supranational pessimism. The ideas take on an Australian specificity with regard to the national's colonial history. 'The Drover's Wife' can be seen as a symbol of freedom and progress, or constriction and defeat, depending on the requirements of the age and the critic's ideological ties to the 'national interest'.

The biographical reproduction of 'Henry Lawson' as a cultural object gives substance and weight to the assumption that *the man*, and not the discourse on the man, is the founding subject of the Australian tradition. But the man of the critical commentaries is a fiction. He is an impossible subject, constructed through the discourse and the interpretative formulations of the texts on Lawson. The discourse creates a myth of origin for national identity, located in Lawson, but capable of being moulded to suit changing needs. Critics posit an identity for Lawson and/or the national character, define its complexities and then construct imagined divisions within his assumed personality to mediate the strengths and weaknesses in Lawson and the national character. In the discourse Lawson's strengths represent Australia; his weaknesses are idiosyncratic.

Further, the commentaries foster a homogeneous tradition by reference to the idea of Lawson as an integrated personality, a national type. In addition, the discourse on Lawson and the national character establishes a bond between writer and audience which functions to stabilize and solidify the construction of a masculine identity (even if Lawson is a 'poor' example; even if the cultural categories masculine/feminine contributed to his own self-doubts and gradual disintegration). This bond of masculine resemblance locates woman within the same masculine economy, but as different from man, what he is not. Contradictions, states of ambivalence and plural possibilities which challenge discursive mastery and might pose a threat to the stability of this order are repressed. Lawson's stories as well as his personality are mastered (but in a variety of ways) as entities within the discourse on national identity.

In Lawson's lifetime, the writings of Barbara Baynton attempted to destabilize received systems of meaning. Her stories mime the bush tradition with irony. But they, like Louisa's Lawson's article and Murray-Smith's biography, have been veiled behind later constructions of the 1890s, Lawson and the national character. I will turn to Baynton's writings now, to register her dissidence as another site of radical resistance existing within, but muted by, the tradition.

1 David McKee Wright, Preface to *Henry Lawson's Selected Poem's* (Sydney, 1918) quoted in Denton Prout, *Henry Lawson: The Grey Dreamer*, 274.

2 Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, 11.

3 Manning Clark, *In Search of Henry Lawson* (South Melbourne: Macniffan, 1978), Preface.

4 Colin Roderick, *The Real Henry Lawson*, 200 and fly leaf.

5 Henry Lawson, quoted in Roderick, *The Real*, 179. For details on Lawson's deterioration, see Prout, 274 ff.

6 Clark, 66, 102.

7 Henry Lawson in Cohn Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson: Collected Verse*, vol. 11, 269. Hereafter referred to as C. V. 11.

8 Henry Lawson in Cohn Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson Collected Verse*, vol. 1, 235. Hereafter referred to as C. V. 1

9 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), C. V. 1, 'The Helpless Mothers', 15.

10 David McKee Wright, quoted in Prout, 274. The three paragraphs of the Wright preface cited here are reprinted in full in Prout's biography of Lawson. Excerpts from these paragraphs also appear, their legendary views affirmed, in the critical studies of Lawson by Colin Roderick and Manning Clark.

11 Wright in Prout, 274-75.

12 See Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688-1980*, 83, 103, 125 and chapters on 'The National Type', 'Bohemians and the Bush', and 'Diggers and Heroes' for a fuller discussion of these issues.

13 Wright, in Prout, 275.

14 Roderick, *The Real*, 176.

15 Prout, 274.

16 For a fuller discussion see Roderick, *The Real*, 176-7. Roderick, himself, is responsible for the reconstruction and editing of the unexpurgated Lawson.

17 H. M. Green, *A History of Australian Literature*, vol. I, quoted in Prout, 275.

18 See Roderick (ed.), *C. V. 1*, 123, 129, 224, 54.

19 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), *C. V. 1*, 1.

20 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), *C. V. 1*, 36 1.

21 Colin Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson: Short Stories and Sketches, 1888-1922*, 'Send Round the Hat', 480. Hereafter referred to as S.S.S.

22 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'In a Wet Season', 160-2.

23 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'The Selector's Daughter', 5 9-66. It is interesting to compare the early family interactions between the husband and wife in this story with those of 'A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father', 680-5. This tale, written in 1893, depicts the mother in a favorable light. The later tale, written in 1902 and assumed to be an 'accurate' depiction of the Lawson household, does not. Yet, the construction of the family life is similar enough in the two stories for critics to assume that the same model was used to represent the two versions.

24 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'The Babies in the Bush', 403-15.

25 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'No Place for a Woman', 397-402.

26 Lawson, in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'The Bush Undertaker', 57.

27 Lawson, 57.

28 H. P. Heseltine, 'Saint Henry: Our Apostle of Mateship', *Quadrant*, 5, 1 (Summer 1960-1), 8.

29 Brian Matthews, *The Receding Wave: Henry Lawson's Prose*, 18-2 7.

30 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S. 'Water Them Geraniums', 569-86.

31 Matthews, 27,

32 Matthews, 182.

33 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'Water Them Geraniums', 572, 573.

34 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'Mitchell on the "Sex" and Other "Problems"', 303-64.

35 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'Mitchell . . . 305.

36 Lawson in Roderick (ed.), S.S.S., 'Mitchell . . . 306.

37 Lawson in Roderick, *The Real*, 7.

38 Clark, 61.

39 Edward Garnett, 'Academy and Literature' (London, 8 March 1902) in Colin Roderick (ed.), *Henry Lawson Criticism, 1894-1971*, 124. Hereafter referred to as H.L.C.

- 40 For a discussion see Brian Kiernan, 'From Mudgee Hills to London Town: A Critical Biography of Henry Lawson', in *The Essential Henry Lawson: The Best Works of Australia's Greatest Writer*, 12.
- 41 White, 110.
- 42 A. G. Stephens, 'Art in Australia' Sydney, Nov. 1922 in Roderick (ed.), *H.L.C.*, 235.
- 43 White, 119.
- 44 Fred Davison (1924), quoted in John Barnes, 'What has he Done for Our National Spirit? - A Note on Lawson Criticism', *Australian Literary Studies*, 8, 4 (Oct. 1978), 486.
- 45 For a discussion of the changing image of Australia after World War II see White, Young, White, Happy and Wholesome', 110-24.
- 46 See R. L. Heathcote, 'Images of a Desert? Perceptions of Arid Australia', *Australian Geographical Studies*, 25 (April 1987), 7.
- 47 Nettie Palmer, *Modern Australian Literature* (1924) excerpt in Roderick (ed.), *H.L.C.*, 235.
- 48 Vance Palmer (1942), quoted in White, 153.
- 49 Heseltine, 5.
- 50 See, for example, articles by A. D. Hope, Vincent Buckley, Judith Wright and Harry Heseltine in Grahame Johnston (ed.), *Australian Literary Criticism* and C. B. Christesen (ed.), *On Native Grounds*.
- 51 H. P. Heseltine, 'The Literary Heritage', in Christesen, 15.
- 52 Matthews, iii, 12.
- 53 Roderick, quoted in Matthews, 15.
- 54 Roderick, *The Real*, 33.
- 55 Clark, 52. Compare these remarks with those made concerning the 'bush Mum' in C. M. H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, Vol. III, 272-3. Discussed in Chapter Three.
- 56 Michael Roe, 'Challenges to Australian Identity and Esteem in Recent Historical Writing', *Tasmanian Historical Association: Papers and Proceedings* 25, 1 (Mar. 1978), 5.
- 57 Lawson in Roderick (ed), *S.S.S.*, 'The Drover's Wife', 47-52. All quotations are taken from the source.
- 58 Clark, *In Search of*, 52.
- 59 Cited in Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, 38. Summers acknowledges Gilmore's reputation for being 'notoriously untruthful', however. This is a character trait which Roderick fails to mention when he credits Gilmore's veracity in asserting that Bertha Lawson provoked Henry's abusive behaviour. Gilmore, who is said to have had a crush on Lawson, blamed Bertha for the failure of their marriage.
- 60 Roderick, *The Real*, 33.
- 61 Prout, 5 1.
- 62 Brian Matthews, 'Louisa and Henry and Gertie and the Drover's Wife', *Australian Literary Studies*, 9, 2 (May 1980), 286-97.
- 63 See A. G. Stephens, 'A Poet's Mother', *Red Page, Bulletin*, 24 Oct. 1896 reprinted in Leon Cantrell (ed.), *A. G. Stephens: Selected Writings*, 268-71.
- 64 E. J. Zinkhan, 'Louisa Lawson's "The Australian Bush-Woman" - A Source for "The Drover's Wife" and "Water them Geraniums"?'', *Australian Literary Studies*, 10, 4 (Oct. 1982), 495-9.
- 65 Zinkhan. 498.
- 66 Louisa Lawson. 'The Australian Bush-Woman', *Boston Women's Journal* (27 July 1889), 233-4 and *Englishwoman's Review* (15 Aug. 1889), 383-4. The English version is reprinted in *Australian Literary Studies* 10, 4 (Oct. 1982), 500-3.

- 67 See, for example, the Adelaide Advertiser, 'The Saturday Review', (4 Dec. 1982), 31, 34 and successive articles on 6-7 Dec. 1982.
- 68 Trout, 17.
- 69 Caroline Chisholm, 'Emigration and Transportation Relatively Considered', (1847), quoted in Summers, Prologue.
- 70 Roderick disagrees. He claims that the story is part of the Lawson myth. See *The Real*, 7.
- 71 Stephen Murray-Smith, Henry Lawson.
- 72 Murray-Smith, 16.
- 73 Murray-Smith, 15.
- 74 Prout, 203.
- 75 Murray-Smith, 10. A. G. Stephens' contemporary assessment supports this view. See his article, 'A Poet's Mother'.
- 76 Roderick, *The Real*, 107.
- 77 Clark, *In Search of*, 75, 113.
- 78 Manning Clark, 'Henry Lawson' in Leonie Kramer, Russel Ward, Trevor Kennedy, Ray Martin and Richard Walsh (eds), *The Greats: The 50 Men and Women who Most Helped to Shape Modern Australia*, 74-9.
- 79 Desmond O'Grady, 'Henry Lawson', in Chris Wallace-Crabbe (ed.) *The Australian Nationalists: Modern Critical Essays*, 73.
- 80 Prout, 21.
- 81 Prout, 16.
- 82 Clark, *In Search of* 9.
- 83 See Prout. 139 and Roderick. *The Real*, 68.
- 84 Prout claims that Bertha resisted the marriage, until Henry tricked her with a poem and a surprise visit to the registry where they were married without parental consent. But Roderick maintains that Bertha wanted the marriage and was not content until 'she had her way'.
- 85 Prout, 138.
- 86 Clark, *In Search of* 70
- 87 Roderick, 112.
- 88 O'Grady, 80, 81.
- 89 A. A. Phillips, 'The Craftsmanship of Lawson', in *The Australian Tradition*, 6. Compare this fulsome assessment of Lawson's craft with Phillips' critique of Barbara Baynton, 75-7, discussed in Chapter 6.
- 90 Phillips, 16.
- 91 Phillips, 'Lawson Revisited', 22.
- 92 Phillips, 31.
- 93 Phillips, 26.

Important: © Copyright in this work is vested in the author or publication in which it appears. [Copyright in the encoding of the work rests with the University of Sydney Library's Scholarly Electronic Text and Image Service]. AustLit holds a perpetual licence to distribute the text to users, by kind permission of the copyright holder. This work may be used, with this footer included, for noncommercial purposes within a subscribed institution or for personal research purposes for individual subscribers, according to the [AustLit Copyright Policy](#) and relevant Licence Agreements. No copies of this work may be distributed electronically or in any other manner outside of the subscribed

institution, or by the individual subscriber, in whole or in part, without express written permission from the copyright holder.