

Brian Matthews: “The Nurse and Tutor of Eccentric Minds”: Some Developments in Lawson's Treatment of Madness

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AN interest in the mad, the deluded and the eccentric of the bush was one of Lawson's earliest preoccupations and undoubtedly helped lead him to his understanding of loneliness and alienation. In *Short Stories in Prose and Verse* (1894), his first book, Lawson devoted a sketch—“ ‘Rats’ ”—and a full-length story—“The Bush Undertaker”—to this subject, apart from incidental references. “The Bush Undertaker”¹ is a taut, grisly masterpiece and a story of considerable importance in Lawson's treatment of madness and dementia. There is a constant shifting between the starkest realities and a weird lonely other-world in which objects and landscapes assume some other significance or are momentarily held in a strange new light that promises but never quite yields insights. Where the narrator's detachment wanes it is replaced by an impressive, mellow tolerance.

The story begins with a hard, incisive attack on the senses:

“Five Bob!”

The old man shaded his eyes and peered through the dazzling glow of that broiling Christmas Day. He stood within the door of a slab-and-bark hut situated upon the bank of a barren creek; sheep yards lay to the right, and a low line of bare brown ridges formed a suitable background to the scene.

“Five Bob!” shouted he again; and a dusty sheepdog rose wearily from the shaded side of the hut...

But the old shepherd's conversational soliloquy, with its plausible assumption of a listener, very quickly leads the story into another world, real enough materially yet pervaded by obscure purposes and threatening revelations of evasive yet apocalyptic weight.

“I'll take a pick an' shovel with me and root up that old black-fellow”, mused the shepherd, evidently following up a recent train of thought.

In a half-light of the mind that waxes and wanes between reality and illusion he eats his meal and carries out his macabre resolve with a detached, off-hand curiosity.

When he had raked up all the bones, he amused himself by putting them together on the grass and by speculating as to whether they had belonged to black or white, male or female.

Thus the old man deals matter-of-factly with reality, yet appears motivated by forces that derive from the other world of his eccentricity. The episode with the body of Brummy begins in this atmosphere as a monstrous tragi-comedy. Remonstrating with the blackened, drum-fleshed corpse in his curiously over-vigorous, colourful idiom, the old shepherd prepares to carry the body off, murmuring sympathy that is gentle in tone, yet still conforms to the logic of his own eerie, dissociated existence, and thus appears ghoulish:

“Come on Brummy,” he said, in a softer tone than usual, “ye ain't as bad as yer might be, considerin' as it must be three good months since yer slipped yer wind. I 'spect it was the rum

as preserved yer. It was the death of yer when yer was alive, an' now yer dead, it preserves yer like—like a mummy.”

These grim paradoxes, uttered with gentle humour, are some preparation for the growing significance that appears to attach to Brummy's funeral progress to the shepherd's hut, and his final burial.

Perhaps the master stroke is the repeated manifestation of the “great greasy black goanna”. It appears for the first time only seconds before the old man makes his discovery and is linked in colour and repulsiveness with the ghastly remains of Brummy:

“Me luck's in for the day and no mistake!” said the shepherd, scratching the back of his head, while he took stock of the remains. He picked up a stick and tapped the body on the shoulder; the flesh sounded like leather. He turned it over on its side; it fell flat on its back like a board, and the shrivelled eyes seemed to peer up at him from under the blackened wrists.

By whatever strange standards govern his world, the shepherd accounts himself fortunate and later reflects as he carries the body home: “I ain't a-spendin' sech a dull Christmas arter all.” But the mad funeral march is plagued by what the old man incredulously assumes to be a “flock” of goannas and he becomes puzzled and a little agitated. The goanna becomes more sinister with each manifestation and its nameless purpose is increasingly clear before the shepherd finally confirms it.

... a great greasy black goanna clambered up a sapling from under his feet and looked fightable.

... a black goanna sidling into the grass.

... another goanna gliding off sideways, with its long snaky neck turned towards him.

Linked as they are with the slow stages of this awful journey, the goanna's repeated appearances begin to assume a symbolic, supernatural force, especially when the shepherd finds, with great bewilderment, “the strangest part of it ... that Five Bob wouldn't touch the reptile, but slunk off with his tail down when ordered to ‘sick 'em!’ ” This is traditionally the reaction of animals in the presence of the supernatural. The old man is profoundly disturbed:

“Theer's sothin' comic about them theer goanners,” said the old man at last. “I've seed swarms of grasshoppers an' big mobs of kangaroos, but dang me if I ever seed a flock of black goanners afore!”

Again, there is the sinister suggestion that something very strange is taking place; there is implied symbolism in the “flock of *black goanners*”, while the use of “comic” is more than quaintly arresting; it seems to denote an utter bewilderment, perhaps on the verge of real fear. It is typical of this story (where reality and illusion shift so continually) that the goanna never in fact *becomes* a symbol of death; but its obscene purpose, its eerie appearances, its effect on the shepherd and its close links with the discovery and subsequent funeral march of Brummy, all lift it into the realm of symbolism. It is both a symbol of death and the repulsive devourer of death; it slips from one role to another, until its intimate and intricate associations with death are resolved and it dies “in violent convulsions on the ground”. One is reminded of the elusively symbolic death of the snake in “The Drover's Wife”.

The funeral in “The Union Buries its Dead” was outwardly a traditional ceremony, yet it became a chilling farce. The funeral of Brummy, conducted by an eccentric, dwarfed by the surrounding bush that stretched away to “the distant range”, becomes an impressive ceremony in which a promise of apocalyptic truth quivers on the brink of the story's flickering realities and is never quite realized. As in “The Union Buries its Dead”, “nothin' matters now—nothin' didn't ever matter, nor—nor don't”, but where this conviction was advanced as an absolute in “The Union”, it is a testimony to the might and awesomeness of death in the mouth of the shepherd. Death emerges as the great reality of the story: muttering “I am the rassaraction”, the old mandistractedly seeks an appropriate way of saluting Brummy's passing into the final real world, but has to fall back on a remembered cliché formula. This death has become important

and significant to him, separated from his peculiar dealing in bones and bodies by confused memories of Brummy as a man, by indignation at the goanna's treatment of Brummy, and by some perception, however vague, of the deep significance of the event (a perception which the Union mourners refused to admit and concealed in various ways).

"It's time yer turned in Brum," he said, lifting the body down.

or

"An' this is the last of Brummy," he said, leaning on his spade and looking away over the tops of the ragged gums on the distant range.

or

"Theer oughter be somethin' sed," muttered the old man; "tain't right to put 'im under like a dog. Theer oughter be some sort o' sarmin."

It is intriguing to note that sorrow in the normal sense plays no part in the shepherd's response. At the end of the "ceremony" he "passed his hand wearily over his forehead—but only as one who was tired and felt the heat." It seems to be a realization that goes far beyond sorrow, makes it redundant in fact; it is perhaps an impression of the release, the finality of death. It is a measure of Lawson's control in this story that he does not allow such reflections to pervade the end of the story; this may have given the ending an air of mystery or symbolism which it is plainly not intended to sustain. He seals it off, as it were, firmly but tolerantly.²

"The Bush Undertaker" seems to me to be the most important venture Lawson made upon the madness theme in both series of *While the Billy Boils*. Nevertheless, madness, eccentricity and aberration make fleeting appearances in many of these stories,³ or lurk as a vague and obscure background threat—testimony to an interest on which Lawson was later to elaborate.

In *On the Track* (1900) and *Over the Sliprails* (1900), however, some interesting changes occur in the treatment of this theme, changes which, incidentally, illuminate in microcosm the decline of Lawson's art. In "No Place for a Woman" the madness of Ratty Howlett seems at first glance to be similar to the old shepherd's, but crucial differences emerge on closer scrutiny. Where the bush undertaker's eccentricity was immediately apparent, and enlisted not so much our sympathy as our tolerance, Howlett's affliction is much more insidious and much more likely to excite a compassionate reaction. The isolation of the bush has not affected him directly, but has materially contributed to his personal tragedy and it is this that has turned his mind. The bush undertaker was one of the products of "the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds"; his particular form of eccentricity was that in his loneliness he had adjusted the world to conform to the growing logic of his own vision, less sublimely but nevertheless in somewhat the same way as did Judith Wright's bullocky. But Ratty Howlett is a man divided within himself, uneasy with his delusions which he half doubts himself, yet painfully dependent on them at the same time. "No Place for a Woman" is the lesser of the two stories; it is loose and probably over-long and there are times when the title point is emphasized far too heavily. Nevertheless, in the madness of Ratty Howlett there is pain and pitiable bewilderment, qualities largely absent from the strange world of the old shepherd, whose very eccentricity was that he had attained a weird and logical self-sufficiency. Howlett is "only mad on one track". He can cope with the world quite efficiently. "Trav'lers and strangers failed to see anything uncommonly ratty about him" unless it was his habit of chasing passers-by for a yarn. "Sometimes he caught one every day for a week, sometimes not one for weeks—it was a lonely track."⁴ It is precisely because Ratty is "only mad on one track" that his plight is so painful. He cannot accommodate the enormous grief, the useless regrets as he re-lives the insupportable experience that has dominated his life. He has had to people this world with ghosts, or live in even worse agony of spirit. His story, as he gasps it out, with halts and repetitions is a little tragedy of intolerable and utterly demoralizing grief:

Then he commenced to speak—taking no notice of me when I asked him if he felt better now—to talk in that strange, absent, far-away tone that awes one. He told his story

mechanically, monotonously—in set words, as I believe now, as he had often told it before; if not to others, then to the loneliness of the bush....

“I didn't want to bring her up the first year. It was no place for a woman. I wanted her to stay with her people and wait till I'd got the place a little more ship-shape....”

“But Mary would come.... She wanted to be with me and look after me, and work and help me.”

As the old man's story unfolds, his own toneless, despairing delivery adds to the sense of tragic inexorability that seems to grip the events. Successive possibilities of rescue from the enclosing trap of bush isolation are relentlessly exhausted. The old man remembers the circumstances with photographic clarity, the trivial mixed in with the crucial, the grisly (reminiscent of “The Bush Undertaker”) with the pathetic:

The old black gin was dead the week before, or Mary would 'a'bin all right. She was tied up in a bunch with strips of blanket and greenhide and put in a hole. So there wasn't even a gin near the place. It was no place for a woman!

He ends on a pitiable and defeated note hinting at the loneliness that was to become his lot for the rest of his life after the funeral.

“They said she was dead. And the child was dead, too.

“They [her family] blamed me, but I didn't want her to come; it was no place for a woman. I never saw them again after the funeral. I didn't want to see them any more.”

Here then is a madness infinitely more painful and affecting than the old shepherd's. Like Mrs Spicer, Howlett is riven and tortured, as if two personalities inhabited his body. He has, like her, a “strange, absent, far-away tone”—a second self that reveals his deepest hurt and grief. The constant repetition of “It was no place for a woman” may be a little overdone but it does keep the true villain of this tragedy before our eyes. It is the *place*, the bush with its monotony, toughness and distances that has brought this disaster on people who dared it.

“No Place for a Woman” is certainly not without faults: indeed, it seems to me an extraordinarily clear illustration of the potential strengths and besetting weaknesses of Lawson's art uneasily and waveringly poised. On the one hand it has some of the graphic, atmospheric economy (“He had a selection on a long box-scrub siding of the ridges, about half a mile back and up from the coach road”); it conveys, too, something of that potent, brooding pressure that characterizes Lawson's vision of the bush and there are moments of passionate and simple intensity in Ratty's account. Yet on the other hand, the story is to some extent mishandled: because the explanation of Ratty Howlett's plight comes as a final, and predictable revelation, the portrayal of his madness loses depth—it lacks the sense of evolving personal disintegration that becomes so powerful for example in “Water them Geraniums”. The repetition of the title phrase has largely replaced the more subtle and unobtrusively symbolic intimations of theme, such as were achieved by means of the goanna in “The Bush Undertaker”, and, even allowing for the moments of undeniable tension in Ratty's story, the long, recalled narrative tends to give a static impression and to blur the sense of place that is effectively evoked at the beginning of the story. Indeed, “No Place for a Woman” seems to tend in two directions at once: towards the profound and sensitive appraisal of human stresses and complexities found in *Joe Wilson*; yet also towards a looser type of story, one with a distinct melodramatic tinge in its presentation of madness, and relying rather heavily on traditional, “stock” responses to well-tryed situations.⁵

In other words, if the great achievement of *Joe Wilson* is to some degree foreshadowed here, there is, equally implicit, the long, agonizing decline in which the shepherds and Howletts of the earlier work become dissociated outcasts—guilt-ridden dipsomaniacs and deluded, embittered romantics, unconvincingly placed in well-worn melodramatic plots.

1. Cecil Mann, ed. *The Stories of Henry Lawson*, First Series (Sydney, 1962). All references to Lawson's stories in this essay are based on Mann's edition.

2. Like the ending of “The Drover's Wife” this conclusion has the same air of sympathy, the same summarizing force, and successfully runs a similar risk of becoming rather romantic or a cliché.

3. e.g. “Settling on the Land”, “That There Dog o' Mine”, “Brummy Usen”, “The Drover's Wife”, “ ‘Rats’ ”, “His Father's Mate”.

4. This reference to a “lonely track” is very common in Lawson and often achieves a symbolic importance. Here, certainly, the laconic afterthought, emphatically separated from the rest of the sentence, has a resonance that lingers artlessly as the story proceeds and is recalled by the later use of the same words to describe Ratty's madness.

5. cf. “The House that was Never Built”, “The Babies in the Bush” and numerous references in “The Christ of the Never” series and “Send Round the Hat”.

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