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Revisiting Bertha Lawson, Henry Lawson's wife

Abstract:

Was Henry Lawson's decline into alcoholism, poverty and an early death really caused by his wife? The biographers of the iconic bush poet and writer – most notably Denton Prout (1963) Manning Clark (1978) and Colin Roderick (1982, 1991) – have all constructed a victim as hero narrative around Lawson's life, blaming Bertha Lawson (nee Breddt) for his personal and creative decline. In their biographies, Lawson's marriage breakdown and judicial separation from Bertha Lawson is narrated as a destructive turning point, with Bertha portrayed as a callous persecutor who 'spun the wheel of retribution' (Roderick 1991: 267) against her husband. The unanimous interpretation in these works is that Bertha Lawson in her legal claims disregarded Henry's evident inability to pay child support, resulting in his imprisonment at Darlinghurst Gaol sporadically from 1905 to 1910.

Because Bertha 'rejected all appeals for mercy' (Clark 1978: 116) Lawson is given a victim-as-hero role within these biographies, with the conclusion that his wife's actions not only had a personal impact on him, affecting his literary output, but prematurely robbed Australian culture of an important poet. With reference to these biographies, this paper will discuss an alternative reading of Bertha Lawson as a single parent with two young children and a limited ability within the mores of the time to provide for her family. It discusses repositioning her narrative within a post-divorce single motherhood discourse that was emerging alongside suffragette narratives in Australia at the turn of the 20th century.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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Introduction

In April 1903, Bertha Lawson, wife of the poet Henry Lawson, alleged in an affidavit that her husband had been habitually drunk and cruel. Two months later during court proceedings in Sydney, he was ordered to pay maintenance of 30 shillings a week to Bertha and their two young children.

After defaulting on that maintenance order Lawson was periodically imprisoned at Darlinghurst Gaol, Sydney, now the National Art School. He died in 1922 and was given a state funeral in recognition of his contribution to Australian literature and identity. As late as 2001, the *Sydney Morning Herald* included Lawson in a list of 100 most influential Australians.

Bertha Lawson died in 1957. In the decades since her death Lawson's principal biographers Colin Roderick (1982, 1989), Denton Prout (1963) and Manning Clark (1978) have portrayed Bertha as a demanding and highly-strung wife who could not cope with Lawson's bohemian lifestyle and post separation punished him with imprisonment. Bertha's actions are blamed for Lawson's creative and personal decline leading to his premature death and robbing Australia of the full potential of a revered writer. He is presented as a literary hero who was victim to both his wife and to his alcoholism that together curtailed his genius.

Yet is that the only story of the Lawson marriage that should be considered or is there an alternative narrative? I revisited Bertha Lawson when I was told that Henry Lawson was incarcerated in Darlinghurst Gaol for non-payment of child support. This casual Lawson anecdote was the impetus for a work of creative nonfiction about the Lawson marriage and separation overlaid with a contemporary memoir of single parenting reflecting on Bertha's experiences.

Creative nonfiction is interchangeably termed literary journalism or narrative journalism. Theodore Cheney (2001) defines creative nonfiction as telling a story 'using facts for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy. Creative nonfiction doesn't just report facts; it delivers facts in ways that move the reader towards a deeper understanding of the topic' (19: 1). In this revisited story, the topic is single motherhood spanning a century of social change underpinned by a constant emotional and financial vulnerability. The Lawson marriage and separation is explored from the perspective of a mother with two children. Her financial stress is revealed by repeated pleas in her letters to Henry now held in the Lothian collection at the State Library Victoria. I called the text *Mrs. L* in a nod to Henry's nickname for his wife in a letter to publisher George Robertson about his marriage breakdown (Roderick 1970).

Revisionist biography

Upon completion of *Mrs. L*, it became apparent that the text reached into revisionist biographical territory. It has repositioned Bertha as a single parent at the turn of the century in Australia rather than the vengeful, unstable ex as portrayed by Lawson biographers (Roderick 1982, 1991, Clark 1978). This 'revisionist impulse' (Atler 2013) in approaching Bertha's story follows Nancy Milford's biography of Zelda Scott Fitzgerald (1970) in which Zelda is an artist rather than the accepted narrative of

Scott Fitzgerald's glamorous but self-destructive wife and 'in the process offered a very different picture of Scott-Fitzgerald himself' (Caine 2010: 107). Linda Wagner Martin goes so far to say that Milford's biography was a turning point in women's biographies, noting: 'Milford told the couple's story from the woman's perspective and thereby led several generations of readers to reassess the better known male's history' (1994: 3).

Similar revisionist portrayals of literary wives and lovers soon followed Zelda: Sophia Tolstoy (Edwards 1981, Popoff 2010) who had previously been portrayed as a jealous shrew; Nora Joyce (Maddox 1989), Hadley Hemingway (Sokoloff 1973, Diliberto 2011) and Nellie Ternan (Tomalin 2012) who had a long, clandestine relationship with Charles Dickens. Such is their popularity many of these biographies have been adapted to films or translated into multiple languages.

Brenda Maddox's biography of Nora Joyce actively seeks to redress a previous portrayal. 'When Maddox tells Nora's story, the Joyce narrative becomes human,' says Wagner-Martin. 'Unable to find work, Joyce lives in misery; three weeks after their first child, Giorgio, is born, Nora takes in laundry to earn money for their living. Anger, poverty, trickery, sex, good and bad, cruelty – the life of Jim and Nora Joyce is coloured with emotion' (1994: 24).

Many of these literary wives contributed to their husband's creative production through inspiration and transcription. Sophia nightly transcribed and edited her husband's work while caring for nine children and enduring 13 pregnancies, being her husband's copy editor and financial manager (Jacoby 1981).

Bertha Lawson also assisted with transcription when Henry was restless and forgetful (Lawson 1931) and maintained a stable home as her husband became increasingly erratic due to his alcoholism. Throughout their marriage, Lawson arguably became 'the master of short story fiction' (Matthews 1986). He published *While the Billy Boils* (1896); *Verses Popular and Humorous* (1899), *Joe Wilson and his Mates* (1901) and *Children of the Bush* (1902) the latter two while they lived in London, where Bertha suffered what would be now called postnatal depression.

With Bertha's support he'd earlier entered rehabilitation hospital for alcoholism in 1898 after which he was sober for a year. In a 1902 letter Bertha told him to 'be like Kipling'. Her actions and letters to Henry suggest that Henry's career benefited from her stability and efforts to keep him sober rather than derailing his literary ambition, if only for their two children's welfare as much as Henry's. It is ironic that some of his later work was directly inspired by his imprisonment.

Changing biographical practices

In line with Barbara Caine's (2010) comment on changing biographical practices the text portrays Bertha as an individual rather than the 'reasonably cursory treatment' (2010: 106) that characterises wives in biographies of male literary writers. Caine comments that, 'Increasing numbers of biographers have faced the challenge which comes with writing of women's lives' (2010: 104) and that such revisionist biographies of women have subsequently, 'significantly challenged traditional

assumptions and ideas... a new awareness of gender has affected biographical writing' (2010: 107). Wagner-Martin further argues that the task of revisionist biography is complicated by the fact women have a public-private identity which may require a different structure than traditional cradle to grave biographic writing practice: 'Recent biographies of Nora Joyce, Hadley Hemingway, Abigail Adams, and Eleanor Roosevelt show a range of approaches to the difficult problem of keeping a wife's character separate from her spouse' (1994: 24). This observation resonated when writing a story that spanned a century to show the contemporary parallels that underlie single parenting as experienced by Bertha Lawson over a century ago.

While Lawson's biographers do not 'purge contradictory and confusing material' (Colwill 2001: 593) from Lawson's life – this would be very difficult given the transparency of Lawson's alcoholism – they have claimed, or inferred, that Bertha contributed to Lawson's personal and creative decline post separation. The first cradle to grave biographic account of Henry Lawson, *The Grey Dreamer*, was written by Denton Prout (1963). While acknowledging the anti-feminist tone in Henry's writing post separation, Prout links it to Lawson's personal circumstances: 'The bitterness of spirit that had overcome Henry, after his separation from Bertha, grew more intense' (209).

In the preface to *In Search of Henry Lawson* Manning Clark describes the book as a 'hymn of praise to a man who was great of heart' (1978: np). Clark's biographer, Mark McKenna, suggested it was Clark's 'extended love letter to Lawson' (2011: 591) and that he empathised with Henry Lawson, often visiting his grave in Waverley Cemetery (590). Given Clark's stature, it was reprinted in paperback with amendments as *Henry Lawson: The Man and the Legend* (1985).

Clark correctly assessed that Henry's alcoholism was the reason for the marriage ending and 'perhaps made Bertha fear her safety' (1985: 134). He acknowledged that Bertha was frightened when Lawson raged that she had 'sucked the life-blood out of him and [was] destroying his creative gifts, being jealous of the one great gift he had' (102). But his empathy for Bertha sharply lessens once the Lawsons separated in 1903. Clark wrote that Bertha 'rejected all appeals for mercy, to forego the money owing to her, to allow him [Henry] to leave the gaol' (1978: 116) and that Henry incited the ire of the women's movement by failing to pay maintenance (1985: 136).

Colin Roderick reviewed Clark's book as 'a tangled thicket of inaccuracies, speculation and ideological interpretation' (Roderick 1978 as quoted in McKenna 2011: 591). In response, Roderick released his cradle-to-grave biography, *The Real Henry Lawson* (1982) followed by *Henry Lawson – A Life* (1989) A prolific Lawson scholar, he also edited Lawson's letters (1970).

Of all of Henry's biographers, Roderick embraces the victim as hero narrative chronicling the troubled, talented literary soul, highlighted by Donald Goodwin's book, *Alcohol and the writer* (1990). Goodwin lists 20th century American writers Poe, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Steinbeck and Faulkner as creative alcoholics. Lawson's literary genius is destroyed by alcoholism and domestic responsibilities yet he ultimately triumphs as an Australian literary legend with a state funeral. Robert McKee describes this story arc as 'character dimension' (1999: 379) and the

contradictions inherent in this victim as hero narrative is what makes Lawson such a fascinating character.

McKee argues that ‘supporting characters orbit the star protagonist and are designed to delineate his complexity of dimensions’ (381). He also highlights the law of conflict that he calls ‘the soul of the story’ (211). This resonates with McKenna’s observation: ‘Clark’s eye was first and foremost on the dramatic impact of the narrative’ (2007: 22-37). In Roderick’s biographies external conflict is created by portraying Bertha as opposing rather than supporting Henry especially after the 1903 separation. Roderick wrote that in 1905 Bertha ‘forced Henry back to his [painting] trade to meet his obligations’ (1991: 264) and that she ‘was implacable’ (267) when she applied to police for maintenance. He argues that Bertha envied her husband’s freedom compared to her lot of caring for their two children:

Bertha saw his compositions appearing in *The Bulletin*, *The Lone Hand*, and *The Worker*. She saw Lawson taking his ease at the [hospitals] Charlemount, The Thomas Walker Convalescent Hospital and in March with [long time friend] Mrs. Byers. Her resentment rose as she saw herself growing old feeding and clothing and educating the children. Once more she spun the wheel of retribution (267).

Caine (2010) reflects that in traditional biographies such as those written by Roderick and Clark their viewpoints and judgments are most influenced by those involved in the male subject’s literary, political or scientific circles. In Lawson’s case, Roderick valued the views of Lawson’s first love and long time friend, the poet Dame Mary Gilmore, with whom Bertha Lawson had an antagonistic relationship, further framing Lawson’s victim as hero narrative: ‘if Mary Gilmore is to be credited, jealousy played a part in Bertha’s remedy’ (1991: 264). Author Ruth Park, who became friends with Bertha in Bertha’s later life, was also friends with Dame Mary Gilmore and pointedly never mentioned Mary to Bertha, aware of their long-standing antagonism that had Henry Lawson at its core (1993).

Colonial divorce law

Family biographer Olive Lawson has also written about Henry in the context of his life in North Sydney (1999) and Louisa Lawson’s feminist writings on the divorce debates in *The First Voice of Australian Feminism – Louisa Lawson’s The Dawn* (1990). Olive Lawson also follows the victim as literary hero arc in her assessment of Bertha:

Louisa’s role in supporting the above legislation carried with it a terrible irony. A few years later, these very provisions, made law in NSW, set in train events that would devastate Henry Lawson’s life. In the early 1900s, separated from his wife and two small children, without money or property, and living on the most meagre earnings from his writing, he was unable to pay maintenance for the support of his children and was imprisoned. This was beginning of the most tragic pattern of events in the history of Australian literature (54).

However in my revisiting of Bertha Lawson, the motivation that drives Bertha jailing Lawson for defaulting on his payments to her is portrayed not as revenge or jealousy but as survival. In doing so, the narrative lends itself to Wagner-Martin's suggestion that the biographer is also a cultural historian: 'Part of the writing of any biography involves letting the reader decide whether or not the subject's choices made sense, given the cultural norms of the times' (1994: 9). Researching Bertha Lawson's story and choices required researching these cultural norms, most importantly the emerging divorce discourse in Australia in the late 19th century.

Divorce and the lesser judicial separation were first introduced in the Australian colonies following the English Act of 1857 that initially enshrined what legal historian Henry Finlay describes as the double standard of adultery (2005). Finlay notes that men were allowed to divorce if their wives were unfaithful; women only if that adultery was aggravated or repeated. The Australian colonies however soon introduced relatively enlightened reforms that included desertion, drunkenness and cruelty. These reforms arose as organisations such as the Victorian Women's Suffrage and Louisa Lawson's Dawn club formed and challenged male privilege across the legal arena.

The divorce debates in Australia were framed by not only the suffragette movement but also a wider social concern about deserted families due to the gold rushes from the 1850s to 1890s. In her book *Deserted and Destitute*, Christina Twomey (2010) highlights public support for the reform: 'Debate on the inclusion of desertion as grounds for divorce in Victoria, for instance, released a flurry of letters and editorials that pointed to the limited employment opportunities available for women responsible for dependent children' (142). Finlay concurs that deserted wives and children became a focus for lawmakers concerned with the financial burden it placed on the community (2005).

Drunkenness was a tandem social problem which divorce reform also sought to resolve. Louisa Lawson and fellow Dawn Club member, Lady Mary Windeyer, 'agitated long and hard for non-discriminatory divorce laws' (Harrison 2006: 597) as did Bertha Lawson's friend, the feminist Rose Scott, and Maybanke Anderson. The women worked with parliamentary reformer, Attorney General WC Windeyer, to obtain the Divorce Amendment and Extension Act 1892 in the colony of NSW, mirroring a similar law enacted two years previously in Victoria.

Louisa Lawson wrote in an editorial in *The Dawn* entitled 'The Divorce Extension Bill or The Drunkards Wife' in March 1890: 'the fate of the Victorian extension bill is a source of keen anxiety to many a miserable wife who has the misfortune to be linked for life to a drunkard' (Lawson, 1990: 52). The article foreshadows Louisa's future daughter-in-law's predicament, and the way Bertha would be judged in later biographies:

All the consolation of the wife of such a ghoul could reasonably expect is well, why did you marry him? About a reasonable question as asking a condemned criminal awaiting his execution why he committed the act that brought him there. What availeth her to say, 'I was young, ignorant, inexperienced in the ways of the world, I

believed and loved him, he vowed that I should not want; he loved me and would love me forever; all these promises he has broken. I have kept mine' (1990: 52).

In 1903, approximately 390 spouses petitioned the Divorce Court for dissolution of their marriage or judicial separation under the amended 1899 Matrimonial Causes Act.¹ Judicial separation decreed that the couple were legally separated and the children subject to child support but were unable to remarry without returning to court and applying for dissolution. The judicial separation required proof of at least two years of habitual desertion, drunkenness or cruelty if no adultery while the stricter dissolution demanded three years. Bertha's 1903 affidavit was carefully worded to fit the clauses on which she was petitioning: 'My husband has during three years and upwards been a habitual drunkard and habitually been guilty of cruelty towards me.'

The core of the biographers' portrayal of Bertha is that Henry was unfairly imprisoned for default of maintenance payments to her and the children. Yet her actions are in the context of the cultural norm of the time which routinely saw debtors sent to prison. At Darlinghurst Gaol Henry was housed in the debtor's quarters, however he was sent to solitary confinement for writing poetry with paper and pencil smuggled from the printer by a fellow prisoner. He also may have been briefly imprisoned in the notorious A wing for male prisoners and refers to the Gaol's chapel in his poem *One Hundred and Three* (1908).

Debtors were classified as C prisoners at Darlinghurst Gaol, indicating they had committed a minor crime and misdemeanor alongside inebriates, those with non-violent mental illness and others deemed low security (Ramsland 2011). Lawson wrote there were other men in Darlinghurst Gaol for the non-payment of maintenance in his autobiographically inspired sketch, *Going In* (1907):

They are up for maintenance (one for neglecting to keep his alleged wife and the other his alleged child). One has been fined double the amount in arrears or three months. The other has been ordered to be detained in Darlinghurst Gaol until the amount is paid. The first is sure to be out in three months and then have worked out his fine and also the amount of arrears; the other expects friends to pay up in a few days but if they don't, he might be there for 12 months and 'arrears' running all the time. Then his only hope will be to get clear of the Commonwealth and female suffrage.

Lawson did not return to jail after a committee of Lawson's friends approached Bertha in 1909 to stop legal action if they could keep him sober and hopefully, working (Roderick 1991). Lawson went bush with friend and writer Ted Brady but Lawson lapsed over ensuing years until his death from a stroke in 1922.

Revisiting Bertha Lawson

While researching this alternative story of Bertha Lawson I was often asked, 'Why do you want to know about *her*?' Allies for Bertha, (and for myself writing about her) were scarce either because of the dominant narrative's vengeful portrayal or that she is simply unremembered. As Bertha wrote to Henry in a 1903 letter, 'I have scarcely a friend.' Claims by the biographers were weighed against competing facts: if Bertha was so vengeful, why did she agree to stop further legal action, and inevitable jailing,

if his mates could dry him out? I was comforted that Rose Scott wrote a letter in Bertha's defence to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1922 after Henry's death. Artist Norman Lindsay declared in his memoir, *Bohemians at the Bulletin* (1965) that he knew and liked Bertha, whom he met when she was managing the Angus and Robertson Gallery.

Bertha's clearest ally is Ruth Park who remembered Bertha as a friend and intelligent woman in her autobiography *Fishing in the Styx* (1993). They became friends when Ruth and her husband D'Arcy Niland co-wrote a radio play about Bertha and Henry's early romance. Park recalled: 'Bertha was a sagacious, passionate little dot of a woman, very different from the way she is portrayed in the many books about her famous husband, Henry' (123). She pointedly added that Bertha worked as the first book saleswoman in Australia. She then managed the Angus and Robertson Art Gallery where she became acquainted with Norman Lindsay and later began a career in child welfare, so was a single mother juggling a professional career foreshadowing the lives of many contemporary single parents today.

After Lawson's death in 1922, perhaps anticipating historical antipathy towards her, Bertha contributed to the anthology edited by their daughter and J Le Gay Breerton in 1931, *Henry Lawson by his mates*, then published her memoirs with co-writer and second partner, writer Will Lawson (no relation to Henry), *My Henry Lawson* in 1943. She writes at length of their meeting, marriage, their sojourn teaching at a Maori school in New Zealand, then their 'troubulous times' (66) in London and briefly, their marriage breakdown. She doesn't, for reasons of the divorce stigma or out of care of his post-death legendary status, go into specific detail about Henry's gaoling for lack of child support. She says, 'At heart he was a good husband and father – except when the temptation to drink was too strong' (81).

Kay Schaffer briefly discussed Bertha in the context of her interpretation of Lawson's work as anti-feminist and provides an insight at odds with his status in Australian literary culture. Reading across Lawson's essays and fiction, Schaffer concludes Lawson blamed women for his wretchedness rather than himself; and Lawson's reoccurring characters such as the larrikin Mitchell represented his attitudes towards women, some of which was written against the backdrop of Bertha's attempts to keep him sober and his post-separation anti-feminism because of being forced to pay maintenance. Schaffer highlights the 1898 fictional work, *The Sex Problem* that features Mitchell:

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 (1990: 121).

Yet as victim as hero to his biographers Schaffer observes he remains a 'cultural myth, a legend' (112).

Meg Tasker and Lucy Sussex have co-written a more empathetic account of the Lawson's life in London between 1900 to early 1902, during which time Bertha was hospitalised at Bethlem Royal Hospital, colloquially known as Bedlam, suffering 'lactation and worry' (2007: 203). They reframed the previous view of Bertha's instability to instead severe postnatal depression, a suggestion which I have continued by including Bertha's previously unpublished letters to her mother from London.

Arguably, revisionist biographies attract criticism precisely because a new perspective upsets the biographic apple cart. Wagner-Martin (1987), was shocked by the reaction to her biography of Sylvia Plath that she was unethical and attempting to malign Plath's husband and family (1994). Until Tomalin's biography *The Invisible Woman* (2012) Nellie Ternan was seen as detrimental to Dickens' legacy, and Tomalin has discussed encountering hostility from those who still see the biography as unseemly on such a great man (Wyndham 2015).

In revisiting Bertha Lawson, I was mindful of angelicising her, especially given the layer of my contemporary memoir of single parenting over her story. Elizabeth Colwill best recognises this conundrum when she writes that there is a 'lived complexity of our lives that opens rich readings of our subjects and that there is tension between, 'our identification with our subjects and the mystery – our baffling distance from them' (2001: 437).

As the marriage always remained in the limbo of judicial separation after Lawson's death Bertha was his widow. Her public profile in celebrating Lawson's life, such as at the unveiling of the Lawson statue in the Domain in 1931, attracted perhaps more justifiable criticism than her jailing him for non-payment of maintenance. Ruth Park recalled that two years before Bertha died in 1957 she still introduced herself as 'Mrs. Henry Lawson' (1993: 191). Bertha and Henry's daughter, also called Bertha, wrote about her parents' complex personalities and separation in her unpublished memoirs now lodged in the State Library of NSW and these memories have been included in the revisited narrative of Bertha Lawson. In the years leading to Lawson's death, letters between him and Bertha show a reconciled civility in the shared interest of their children with the animosity largely dissipated. Perhaps Bertha loved Henry Lawson but couldn't live with him, which is why she resisted the final court application to dissolve the marriage. He never sought the decree either and instead lived platonically with the loyal Mrs. Byers.

As Wagner-Martin notes, 'biographers of women have a further responsibility: to understand both their subject's cultures and their own and to provide their readers with a bridge back into history, so that they understand why certain behaviours then were approved or disapproved' (1994: 29). By revisiting Bertha Lawson, the narrative repositions her narrative within a divorce discourse that was emerging in Australia at the turn of the 20th century and the emotional and financial costs of single parenting that remains debated today.

Endnote

¹ This number is approximate based on the number of petitions recorded in 1903 listed in the State Records Authority of New South Wales.

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