

**HENRY LAWSON,
COLLECTED VERSE
Vol. 1: 1885-1900, ed. by
Colin Roderick,
Angus & Robertson, \$6.50.**

BY ANY STANDARD this is a splendid book, and coming as it does on the occasion of the Lawson Centenary it makes a fitting tribute. Here, gathered into one volume for the first time, is all the verse Lawson wrote up till the time he settled in England at the end of 1900. "*The Ballad of the Drover*", "*Faces in the Street*", "*The Star of Australasia*", "*Second Class Wait Here*", "*The Uncultured Rhymer to his Cultured Critics*" — verses as well known as these need no introduction.

But what we have here is not just the complete text of all the pre-1901 verse. As well, the notes record all the original forms and drafts which Lawson shaped and worked over to produce the final product. So for the first time it is possible to watch Lawson at work, as it were. On top of this Professor Roderick has gathered a great deal of background information about the verse, and this is all included in the last 70 pages of the book.

This is not the place to discuss Lawson's merit as a poet. Indeed he seems never to have referred to himself by such a title: his books were always *verse*, not poetry. Nonetheless, as Professor Roderick remarks in his Introduction, Lawson has come in for a good deal of critical attack over the past decade or so, an attack which anyone who is interested in Lawson's place in our literary history cannot ignore.

It's certainly true, as Professor Roderick grants, that Lawson sometimes wrote bad verse. But it's also true that his best was very good indeed. As a

short story writer he may have been more consistently good, but it's a fact of Australian history that much of Lawson's verse, (specially that published in *The Bulletin* and *The Worker*) played a significant role in the development of working class consciousness — largely because, at its best, it had force and an honesty which set it apart from the general run of jingoistic rhymes.

It would be untrue though to deny that a good deal of Lawson's own work depended over-much on sentimental emotionalism and jingoism. He himself was aware of these excesses — a fact probably indicated by the violence of his reaction to unfavourable criticism ("*My Literary Friend*", "*The Uncultured Rhymer*").

But reading through his verse again I was struck by the range of his interests as much as by the vitality which he brought to his work. At times, of course, it is mere doggerel; but at those times where Lawson seemed to feel and believe what he was writing, it is verse of a higher order. For those for whom he is simply the rhymster of floods and swag-men and bush-fires, there is the bitter and frequently moving verse written from the centre of Sydney's Depression of the early 1890's. And for those for whom he is simply the blindly nationalistic Australian, the last verse in the book, "*With Dickens*", will no doubt come as a surprise. Not only does it show an amazingly wide knowledge of Dickens's work and characters, but it also shows the way in which Lawson was able to use the new environment and resources he found in England.

The other volume of *Collected Verse* is due to be published soon, and the set will no doubt take its place as the standard for many years to come.

L. N. C.