THE GHOST of Henry Lawson has been exhumed and reburied many times since September 2, 1922, when his State Funeral, complete with the brass band he’d always wanted, wound through the Sydney streets to Waverley Cemetery, followed by many genuine and crocodile tears. Each time the figure that emerges is a different Henry Lawson, who tends to be remade in the image and likeness of his new creator, emasculated by the Establishment, mythologized by the Left. Yet Henry Lawson endures through all these vicissitudes, which tells us something important about the man whose 100th Anniversary we celebrate this year.

Who was Henry Lawson, and what is the power of this man who refuses to lie down and die? It is one of the ironies of Australian letters that a deaf introvert became the symbol of Australian mateship, an alienated Australian became the archetypal Australian, writes Stephen Murray-Smith. How much substance is there in the romantic figure, born on the diggings, following the gold rushes, living on a ‘free’ selection, leaving school at 13, the unemployed, unlettered wanderer, the bagman, the drunk, the rugged individualist, the ‘natural’ genius, the symbol of mateship, unionism and socialism?

It is not so much that the legends are all fiction. It is what lies behind the legends that explains the paradox and the complexity of Lawson the man, and the writer; the kind of complexity mirrored in the titles given to him: The People’s Poet, Australia’s Drunken Poet, The Poet of the Great Tribe of Down and Out, The Australian Chekhov, Australia’s Gorki.

PIPECLAY

It is true that Lawson was born in a tent under a tree about a mile from Grenfell on June 17, 1867. His father, Peter Larsen (afterwards Lawson), a Norwegian ex-seaman and navigator, fol-
lowed the last of the poor man's rushes to Gulgong and free selected a barren, heartbreaking block of land at Pipeclay with a vain hope that gold might lie under it. Lawson had a scratchy education in bush schools until he was 13. Later, his intellectual restlessness led him to night school in Sydney and public examinations. He never got over his sense of inferiority at failing his matriculation, not a difficult examination in those days.

At school, and later in the Sydney factories, he was Balmy 'Arry, deaf, delicate, introverted, victim of incompatible parents; a foreign father and a rebellious, gifted, neurotic mother who, themselves, never fitted in. It is the kind of relationship he fictionalised many times; the man gentle, feckless, footloose, the woman, overbearing, neurotic, and cold. The child, withdrawn, suffering, fey appears again and again in Lawson's stories (e.g. *Brighten's Sister-in-Law, A Child in the Dark*). "I wasn't a healthy-minded, average boy; I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake, and grew up to be a bushman, and didn't know what was the matter with me—or the world—but that's got nothing to do with it." (*Joe Wilson's Courtship.*)

There is another paradox here. The Poet of the Bush did not grow up to be a bushman. After his first 16 years almost all his adult life was spent in big cities, except for his 18 months' tramp through western N.S.W. in 1891. The landscape of Pipeclay is the first of Lawson landscapes he made his own, the landscapes that haunted his subconscious and provided that unforgettable symbolic background of melancholy and quiet despair, against which the brotherhood of man, or mateship is the only defence (e.g. *Settling on the Land, A Day on a Selection, Water them Geraniums*, all the Joe Wilson stories).

Yet this non-average boy of non-average parents was to live through the typical triumphs and tragedies of the Australian working class of his period, and to write out of the point of view of that class, even creating a style to communicate with his audience, and to make the inarticulate articulate.

**FACES IN THE STREET**

Frank Hardy points out in his article, "The Genius of Henry Lawson, Time, Place and Circumstance", that when Lawson came to Sydney to live after 13 years on the selection at Pipeclay, the focus of Australian life was moving to the cities, and Lawson moved with it. The militant labor movement, the beginnings of industrialisation, the whole political turmoil of the late '80's was centred at Sydney. "His writings reflect the objects as well as the ideas of the labor movement, national as well as class ideas, negative and positive, confused and clear, reactionary and progressive," writes Hardy.
"It is true that he came up with the rise of the working class and went down with it, the tragedy of a time and class was his tragedy. In thirty years he saw the last of the rushes, the bitter struggle to unlock the land, and the misery of the small selector, the industrialisation of Australia, and the creation of an urban working class," writes Stephen Murray-Smith.4

The Sydney of his youth, working for sub-contractors painting coaches, often out of work, gave him the background for stories of greasy restaurants and boarding houses (e.g. The Full and Plenty Dining Room in Going Blind), the unemployed gathering before dawn outside the Herald offices, striking matches to read the 'Want' ads, Arvie Aspinall and his alarm clock on a tin tray, the early Republican, Nationalist and Socialist poems; A Song of the Republic, The Army of the Rear, Faces in the Street. Utopian socialist, rhetorical, often sentimental, a crude line following a fine one. this early poetry had enormous appeal, because of its topicality, humanism and class stand, and the driving force of the style, simple, passionate, sincere.

It answered a need by a new radical literate public, and still answers that need. The continual popularity of many Lawson poems, The Men who made Australia, Faces in the Street, Second class wait Here, I'm too old to Rat, Freedom on the Wallaby, The Cambaroora Star, The Leader of the Push (parodied, some say, by Lawson himself, as The Bastard from the Bush) proves the existence of a public far removed from Lawson's 'cultured critics' and their standards.

"This is not 'high poetry', but the passion and grip of it make it valuable and, in Australia, memorable," wrote A. G. Stephens, editor of the Bulletin Red Page.

"Something of Lawson's human yearning voice still comes through the poems," writes Judith Wright. "Lawson, at his worst, can still move us."

Years later Lawson was to say: "I have lost the thunder both far and near, the almighty sympathy, the splendid crudity and the sledgehammer force of that lonely boy's song."

Lawson had done what all left wing poets ever since have dreamed of doing in Australia. He brought poetry to the people. "His verses were quoted up and down the country," says Vance Palmer in National Portraits.6

The times created Lawson's content and style, the Bulletin was there to print his work and spread it amongst the kind of audience he came from and understood. Later there was a nationalist publishing company, Angus & Robertson, to print his collected verse and short stories.
For a moment, ‘the thunder far and near’ tended to obliterate the limitations and contradictions in the point of view of Lawson and his public, and obscured the fact that Lawson’s genius as a short story writer would leave the Bulletin school far behind in range and subtlety.

**THE CAMBAROORA STAR**

“The worst influence on Lawson’s verse was the spirit of the time he lived in, with its smugness and its hollow patriotism and its taste for violence and drum beat rhythms,” writes Judith Wright.7

But ‘the spirit of Lawson’s time’ was both the best and the worst of cradles, for alongside the smugness, jingoism, and white chauvinism (especially towards the Chinese), the sentimentality, and the brutality was the spirit of radical dissent, the democratic, nationalist and socialist ideas. Lawson reflected them all. Arthur Parker, Lawson’s mate on a building job in the Blue Mountains in 1887, tells us that Lawson’s whole soul was in his writings and his hopes for socialism. “I think he would gladly have died for the Revolution.” Together the two young men went down to Sydney and joined the Australian Socialist League.

Yet this is the same man, who, back from Bourke, in 1893 was to meet Jack LeGay Brereton in the Sydney streets and say: “I know what I’m talking about. I couldn’t say it in public, because my living depends partly on what I’m writing for The Worker, but you can take it from me, Jack, the Australian worker is a brute and nothing else.”8

Lawson’s parents had separated. Louisa Lawson was running a boarding house in Sydney, a Suffragette paper, The Dawn, and leading a movement for women’s rights. Her boarding house and newspaper office were centres of radical discussion. Although Lawson nicknamed her ‘The Chieftainess’, he resented her managing ways and lack of maternal warmth, Louisa Lawson was obviously the catalyst who steered Henry into a literary life and politics. She had named him after Henry Kendall, encouraged and published his early work. In her house he met Kendall’s widow who urged him to write, and Mary Cameron (afterwards Mary Gilmore) who lent him her books.

Yet he always openly sided with the quiet, withdrawn father he immortalised in An Old Mate of Your Father’s, his first short story, and much of his pathological hatred of ‘good women’ in his last years could be traced to his mother’s dominant personality and his unhappy marriage with a woman not unlike her in many ways. “All women are natural liars but political women are worse,” he was to write in 1913.
After a short period in Albany where jobs were scarce, Lawson was offered a job in Brisbane in 1891 working on *The Boomerang* with A. G. Stephens, and the editor Gresley Lukin. Here he met William Lane and again found himself in a centre of unionism and radical discussion. "It was the first and only chance I got in journalism," he comments, not without rancour. He conducted the 'Country Crumbs' column for £2 a week.

After the defeat of the Shearers' strike *The Boomerang* collapsed, and Lawson came home to Sydney in 1892, jobless, fair into the Depression and the bank failure. From this period dates his constant theme of 'glory in defeat'. *The Boomerang* stands in for *The Cambaroora Star*. The ALP was jockeying in the political arena. The old ideas of revolution and mateship faded against the manoeuvres of reformism and it was a far cry from the romantic fervor in his early twenties.

But the image of Lawson standing on the wharf watching *The Royal Tar*, with Lane and Mary Gilmore aboard, set sail for Paraguay and a new Utopia, is a sobering one. Lawson was never as Utopian as that. In fact, perhaps Lawson was more realistic than Utopian in this period of his life. It is interesting to note that he wrote some of his best short stories at this time, stories which depend, not on romantic rhetoric for their impact, but the opposite: economy, realism, restraint, irony, and a deep sense of tragedy.

2. ibid.

(The second part of this article will appear in the August-September issue.—Ed.)