Towards the end of 1892, with £5 from the Bulletin and a ticket to Bourke, (or Comeanaveadrink) Lawson set out for copy. He got enough to fill volumes of his greatest short stories.

Hungerford and Bourke were the second great world of the Lawson short stories. It was a world perfectly suited to Lawson’s genius, its faiths and its limitations, its innocence, drunkenness, weakness, morality, and horror, set against a landscape in hell.

Sky like a wet grey blanket; plains like dead seas, save for the tufts of coarse grass sticking up out of the water; scrub, indescribably dismal—everything damp, dark, and unspeakably dreary. (In a Wet Season).

He and his mate, Jim Gordon, sometimes thought the prototype of Mitchell, joined the General Workers’ Union under assumed names. For 18 months they mixed with the ordinary men Lawson would immortalise as the spirit of bush unionism and mateship, of broken lives and tragedy. The spirit of bush unionism was dying away. Lawson caught the tone of that dying fall in the Bourke and Hungerford stories, e.g. Hungerford, In a Dry Season, In a Wet Season, The Shantykeeper’s Wife, Shooting the Moon, The Bush Undertaker, Macquarie’s Mate, The Drover’s Wife, all the marvellous Mitchell stories told in Stiffner’s grog shanty, and along the track with the moon rising.

The moon rose away out on the edge of a smoky plain, seen through a sort of tunnel or arch in the fringe of mulga behind which we were camped—Jack Mitchell and I. The timber proper was just behind us, very thick and very dark. The moon looked like a big new copper boiler set on edge on the horizon of the plain, with the top turned towards us and a lot of old rags and straw burning inside. (Our Pipes).

Back from Bourke, Lawson set off for New Zealand in 1893 with a free passage. For three months he was unemployed in Wellington, sleeping in a sewerage pipe. Then he got a job on the South Island, as a telegraph linesman, work that he loved. Out of
these experiences came the immortal Steelman and Smith stories: outsiders journeying on a discovery of themselves and society.

He left a steady job in New Zealand for the promise of the editorship of a new daily *Worker* in Sydney, but three days after he reached home the daily *Worker* folded up, and “After a deal of shuffling humbug” as he puts it, Lawson was offered a subordinate post on the weekly *Worker*. In a month he was out of a job with a “disastrous effect on his politics and his creative morale.”

From this experience seems to date much of his disillusionment with the Labor movement and Labor Party politicians.

Lawson was a pretty good hand at pricking the big bright balloons of the nineties. “The sunlit plains extended” were apt to extend a bloody long weary way for the man on foot, as against the man on horseback, and the gilt on the Golden Nineties legend wore very thin for the workless Sydneysider, as against A. G. Stephens editing the Red Page from the security of the *Bulletin* office. Lawson’s point of view, criticised by Stephens, was as simple and as basic as that. (e.g. The Lawson-Paterson Bush controversy in verse, and *The Golden Nineties* sketch.)

Already, in 1896, the title of his first book of verses, *In the Days When the World Was Wide*, sounds like a middle-aged man looking backwards, yet Lawson was only twenty-nine.

**DRIFTING AND SHIFTING**

From Lawson’s traumatic marriage to Bertha Bredt in 1896 dates a whole period of shifting from place to place, even as far afield as London. To Lawson far fields were always greener, but, although he had some big literary success in the years between 1896 and 1902, (the years of his marriage), he never succeeded in escaping from himself and his problems.

Bertha Lawson encouraged him in these wanderings, mainly to get him away from the bailiff and the drink problem, which was becoming more and more compulsive as the years passed. They sailed for Western Australia in 1896, with an advance of £10 from Angus and Robertson on his first short story collection, *While the Billy Boils*. Back in Sydney, Lawson threw himself into the boozy male world of the “Dawn to Dusk Club” with his bohemian friends, Victor Daley, Jack LeGay Brereton, Fred Broomfield, Nelson Illingworth and Bertram Stevens. Lawson held the title of “Bard of the Tribe.”

Bertha got him off to New Zealand and teaching jobs in a Maori school, where it is thought most of the Joe Wilson stories were
written, with Joe Wilson as Lawson's alter ego, and Mary standing in as Bertha.

A sinecure in the Government Statistician's Office in Sydney lasted only six weeks. Lawson couldn't stomach any sort of office routine and this consisted only of signing on at 9 a.m., doing his own writing during working hours, and signing off at 4.30 p.m.¹⁰ Probably to get him away from Hannah Thornburn (or Thom-burn) an artist's model for Nelson Illingworth, the sculptor, Bertha and their two young children, accompanied Lawson to London in 1900. London was obviously a literary mecca for Lawson. Perhaps he hoped to get the kind of literary evaluation there he had never really had in Australia. In spite of some real successes he was homesick in England, his obsessive drinking began again, and after Bertha's nervous breakdown, an advance from Blackwood's magazine brought the Lawsons back to Sydney in 1902.

There is some evidence to support the belief that Lawson had intended leaving Bertha and living with Hannah Thornburn on his return, but two weeks before the ship berthed Hannah was dead. It had been a mysterious and romantic love affair as many Victorian extra-marital affairs of this sort tended to be. It was never tested by any of the difficulties of brutal reality. No wonder Hannah became Lawson's "spirit girl" and the subject of much sentimental poetry. Later he fictionalised her as "That Pretty Girl in the Army" and "The Lily of St. Leonards" one of Lawson's good bad girls with a past, another typically Victorian point of view.

The marriage between Bertha and Henry, which began as a love match, was soon over. They lived together in Sydney only briefly, and, after the death of their new-born baby, and Lawson's attempted suicide at Manly, Bertha applied for a legal separation and left him.

ELDER MAN'S LANE

In his last years Lawson lived in Sydney lodgings, drinking heavily, and writing spasmodically, with a great deal of hack work. He developed paranoic and manic-depressive tendencies, was several times a patient in a Sydney mental clinic, went to jail for 'wife starving', was rescued several times by his old mates, and sent to Mallacoota Inlet to stay with E. J. Brady, and to a sinecure as 'poet in residence' at the Leeton Irrigation Scheme.

It was a quixotic idea. Leeton was a prohibition area. Lawson resented his banishment and made sardonic copy out of it in sketches like The Unknown God at Narrandera, but it did
result in a number of stories and the creation of two odd ‘beat’ characters, Previous Convictions and Dotty.

Henry Lawson died penniless in 1922 at the early age of 55. His body was found in the backyard of the little cottage he shared with Mrs. Elizabeth Byers, his ‘little landlady’ or ‘little mother’, 16 years his senior, who had stuck to him all through these last bitter years. Even the names he gave her are synonymous with his dependence.

“Personally, socially and politically Lawson was ill equipped to enter the 20th Century”, writes Frank Hardy. “His decline had already begun in the nineties with the decline of militancy in the Australian Labor movement.”

There is some truth in this but it is too simple. Lawson could never see life in terms of black and white. Life for him was contradictory, diverse and ironic.

One could ask the question, why did not personal tragedy and suffering make Lawson a greater writer? Scott Fitzgerald destroyed himself by compulsive drinking but went on to make creative copy out of his own tragedy in The Crack Up. It is interesting to compare Lawson’s last ‘Johnson’ stories with the Fitzgerald stories in The Crack Up, particularly Lawson’s first story in the series, Johnson’s Jag, (Bulletin Dec. 26, 1912).

Johnson’s Jag is a strong story, objective, pitiless and tragic in the best Lawson sense. There are signs in this group of stories that Lawson was moving into a new period in his writing, a new book with a Sydney city setting, that he was struggling to evaluate his tragic experiences, both personally and even politically, although there is little overt politics in these stories and sketches.

But worn out with the struggle to live, mental illness, alcoholism and isolation, he could not encompass any longer the kind of feats he managed in the old days. Jack Lang, his brother-in-law, has recounted how They Wait on the Wharf in Black was written on the same night Lawson was carted home dead drunk.

He knew a lot more about people, mateship, utopian ideas, and himself, than he knew in 1888. If it was a less enchanted vision, in some ways it was a broader, truer one (e.g. his sympathetic Chinese sketches, the prophetic The Hopeless Futility of the Sydney Streets (1920), and the tragic evaluation of war in the poem, Shall we hear the Children Singing, o my brothers).

Lawson lost the sense of his own identity in Blues Point Road, Elder Man’s Lane and Skull Street. It had never been very
strong. He is nearly always the shadowy observer in the pub or round the campfire, or else a kind of split personality inside and outside the story.

But in those early days he was sustained by a community of men, usually the outcast wanderers in the lonely savage hell of Hungerford, the pub and the endless dreary flats, the men they might have been and the good Victorian girls who waited, or didn’t, lost somewhere in their past.

Flung finally on his own resources, the lost shadow of the boy from Pipeclay and the man on the tramp back of Bourke, is finally and hopelessly alone. His creation of Benno and the old ‘uns, Previous Convictions, and Dotty, all sentimentalised figures, do little to fill the gap. Lawson creates an alter ego, Johnson the writer, in an attempt to deal creatively with the problem, but Johnson comes out of nothingness, a spook with no roots anywhere, nothing in common with the boy from Pipeclay or the man in the shanty bar with Barcoo, Gentleman Once, Awful Example, The Giraffe, and Mitchell (the apotheosis of the Saviour). Johnson is the sophisticated traveller, world weary, classless, alone and drunk on the horse-ferry, with only a desperate stoicism between him and the city of dreadful night.

Only for a moment, in Darlinghurst Jail, the mental hospital or the Inebriates’ Home (The Boozers’ Home prophesied by Mitchell?) does Lawson get a faint returning tug of the old community of men.

But fate and nothingness has taken over, and there is nowhere further to go. The hell is so complete he can only retreat from it. The grim jokes of Hungerford are too grim now, the irony abandoned for the rags of self pity and the shreds of sentimentality to cover his unbearable nakedness (e.g. Going In, Gentlemen All, His Unconquerable Soul).

Only when the choice was still there to be made could he manage himself with a power that triumphed over chaos. The vision of Sweeney, the drunken wanderer he met at Bourke, in the comparatively innocent world of bush and pub and open road, could once be faced and pre-shadowed . . . “Visions come to me of Sweeney with his bottle in his hand,” but to die in Elder Man’s Lane with a bottle of cheap grog at your foot, and no mate beside you, that was a hell past facing and past creating.

Even Lawson’s jingoism, his conscription doggerel, in the 1914-18 war, could be explained by a pathetic longing to get back to the community of men, to become the spokesman for Australia, a kind of literary ‘Anzac’, even if the people were deluded and united around an imperialistic blood bath.
Lawson had a surfeit of adulation in his lifetime; big editions, a great deal of paternalistic assistance. What he really needed was an agent as hard-headed as Angus and Robertson, and a proper appreciation of his genius.

"His methods were too original," writes Arthur Phillips. "He died of neglect, hopelessly underestimated." Phillips castigates the imperceptiveness of Lawson's academic critics who "patronised his inspired naivete and nagged him to adopt conventional methods". What Lawson is getting across to his working-class readers is the tone and feel of an experience that they will recognise. It is a problem of style created to match the content.

But without a climate of informed appreciation, without the belief that his stories were not just a rich regional lode, soon worked out, but were universal and for all time, the journey from Pipeclay to Elder Man's Lane had something fatalistic and preordained about it.

But in spite of it all he walks the streets of Sydney still, and puts his indelible contradictory thumb-mark on Australian literature ...15

the spook of Henry Lawson, bound for the Lord knows where; with a couple of old magazines carefully rolled in brown paper and carried down Blue's Point Road to give his creditors the impression that he is taking some new stuff over to the Bulletin and will presently return with a cheque. Let me see! It used to be: "I plead guilty, your Worship; and I want to make a statement." How will it be? "I plead guilty, Lord, and I want to make a statement." No, no statement will be necessary then. Or: "I want time to pay, Lord"? But then it will be too late.