VALE

Vincent Wardell, 87, died at Newcastle 17th July, 1990.
Mr. Wardell was a member of the I.H.S.
He was the manager of Lysaghts Port Kembla during World War II. It was largely due to his urging that the Owen Gun was accepted for use by the Australian Armed Forces.

Our Society was represented at a special function on the 19th of June, at the Council Building when a sculpture of the Owen Gun’s inventor was presented to the Wollongong Library with other Owen momentos, organised by members of the Owen family and Sally Bowen and other women workers at Lysaghts when the gun was being constructed. The presentation was made in the presence of the Lord Mayer, other members of the Wollongong Council and business and community leaders. Mr. Wardell’s role in the gun’s production was remembered with great respect by the younger generation of Lysaght’s management.

In his retirement after his service at Lysaght’s in Port Kembla, Newcastle and then in Sydney, Mr. Wardell devoted himself to the planting of Australian native shrubs and trees at Charlestown.

CHRISTMAS IN NOVEMBER?

It has been suggested that the annual Christmas Dinner of the Society should be held in November, rather than December, at the University Bistro. This would be followed by the Traditional Christmas Society Meeting in December at which members slides are shown. If members have any objection to these proposed arrangements, please contact our treasurer, Amelia Pezzutto.

HENRY LAWSON’S GHOST

At Gerringong there are two empty cottages on the slope behind a long pale brown beach. On the door of the smaller and older of the buildings there are chalked many inscriptions to inform the weary wayfarer that this is a “haunted house” and to warn him to “look out for the ghost at 12.” The veranders and partition of both houses are gradually disappearing, for wood is scarce. Once there were thick curtain-poles, a cedar mantelpiece and two cupboards in the more recent abode. The cupboard doors, I recollect, kindled with almost miraculous rapidity. The white pine lining is a tradition—a sweet dream of the distant past. The flooring is hard and unsatisfactory, but can be put to profitable use by a man with a tomahawk. Even now there are traces of what was once a garden, and evidence that a sanguine agriculturist planted his beds with aloes and tomatoes. The whole of the surrounding estate is a grazing-ground for cattle.

It was almost dark when we reached the familiar camp. Certainly the light was not bright enough to justify a walk to the scrub at the northern end of the beach in search of firewood. The foam shone white along the edge of the dusky sea. ‘Arry took the billy and fetched water from the swamp which lies between the camp and the beach, while I lit a fire in the fireplace of the haunted house.

“Why not the big house?” said my mate slinging the billy on the wire hook which was suspended from an iron bar in the chimney.

“This is cleaner,” I explained.

“Smaller, and not so much room for the dirt,” he amended, unrolling his swag in a corner near the fire. “I wonder why they say this place is haunted.”

“Dunno! I reckon somebody put up a notice for a joke, and others have added their little say. There’s a new inscription there on the wall to say: ‘Prepare to die when the ghost tramps on the front verander.’ That must have been written by some fellow who was wakened by the cows.”

“No,” said ‘Arry, “here’s the ghost now. Have you got the tobacco?”
There was a shuffling step outside, as somebody made his way carefully over the ruins of the veranda. Then the door was thrust open and in stepped a traveller. He was small and dark, with a Jewish face and bright eyes. He advanced and lowered his swag. In accordance with etiquette he asked: "Any room, mates?" and I answered: "Lots!" He asked the way to the water, but was obviously glad when we offered to make enough tea for three. He took a piece of raw steak from his nose-bag, and grilled it on a zigzagged piece of hoop-iron that he found on the hearth. All the while, he chatted of the usual topics of the road, told us which were the best places for "tucker," and jeered at the wages offered by the Illawarra pastoralists. "The local chaps take anything, and don't know any better," he said. "A fellow who's never been out of the district cuts a bit of a figure on eight bob a week." As he spoke he slapped down his hissing steak on a slab of bread and said: "Billy's boiling, I think, mates! in with the tea! Then a happy thought struck him. The ends of his moustache lifted, and wrinkles rayed from the outer corners of his eyes, as he asked: "Ever read them stories called While the Billy Boils?"

We had.

"Pretty good, ain't they?"

We thought they were.

"Read When the World was Wide?"

We passed favourable judgement on the volume of poems.

"Yes, some likes'em," he murmured. He chewed a tough bit of steak for a few minutes, and finally bolted it in despair. Then he added: "Some don't."

We railed on the unappreciative.

He was sitting on his swag directly in front of the fire; we were lounging on either side. He looked from one of us to the other, and said; "You like poetry, an' you know what's good when you see it. I don't mind telling you—perhaps, I'd better not, though—O, bust it! I'm drinking your tea, too! well I wrote them poems; my name's Henry Lawson"

He looked round for admiration, and got it. When I considered that Lawson's portrait had been thoroughly published throughout Australia, I was charmed by the audacity of the little impostor.

"Oh," I said, "do have some more tea!" And I refilled his pannikin.

"If you don't believe me—"

"Oh, we do," 'Arry assured him, and I corroborated with "Easily."

"I can prove it. You know Lawson's style—my style. Something about it a chap can't mistake."

"Oh, there is strong individuality."

"Well, run your eye over that."

He took a couple of dirty sheets of paper from his pocket and handed them to me. I unfolded them and read these lines, which were written in a neat round hand:

**BILLY'S SWAG**

*It was just before the diggers made a rush for Lie-an'-Rot,*  
*That the swaggie who was gone on Jimmy Nowlett's girl was shot:*  
*He was drinkin' in the shanty where she useter serve the grog,*  
*When Jimmy got the needle an' told him he must shog,*  
*But the gleam of Mary Carey's single eye was like a star*  
*Above a mighty tempest, as they bumped about the bar.*
They bit each other's noses as along the floor they rolled,
(O, there's nothing in the present like the gory days of old!) They plugged each other's peepers an' they gripped each other's hair. An' Mary laughed an' sooled 'em; but her dad begun to swear, For over every inch of floor an' wall they whirled an' crashed, Till every bit of glass about the bloomin' bar was smashed.

In the corner by the counter was a sorter canvas bag Where Carey kept his cartridges with bits of oily rag, An' the lovers tumbled over, an'—next minute—he—was dead. He'd bumped agin' a cartridge, an' it freed him from his pain, For it went off like a blast an' lodged a bullet in his brain.

We buried him in secret an' a belt of mulga scrub, An' fought about his blankets at the back o' Carey's pub; But I often think about him when I open out his swag Or pull my tea an' sugar from his swellin' tucker bag.— Of course he doesn't want 'em now, he's got his bed and board An' a rum-an'—nectar, maybe, at the shanty of the Lord.

I was astounded. The hand was the hand of Lawson, or a very close imitator of his style. Had this bead-eyed little Jew written the verses? If not, how had they come into his possession? “They are pretty lines,” I said, “pretty and pathetic.” He waved the paper aside when I held it towards him. “If you think it's a good poem,” he remarked diffidently, “you'd better keep it. It's never been printed. Sometime, when you're on your uppers in the city, you can publish it. You ought to be able to get a couple of quid for it, if you tell 'em who wrote it. I don't think it's quite as good as some of the pieces in the book, myself.”

I thanked him for his gift, and stowed it carefully away. The conversation drifted to other topics. Lawson was enthusiastic in his praise of Banjo Paterson. “Not but what I didn't like him at first.” he admitted. “First time I ever met him, we had a fight—nothin' much you know; just a spar round—on the Lavender Bay wharf. But bless you he didn't mind. Took it well he did. Come up to me with his handkerchief to his nose and says: 'Shake Hands, old man. You're a bit smarter with them paws o' yours than you look.' And we've been friends ever since.” “I'd always heard Lawson was a bit hard of hearing,” ‘Arry said, “but you hear all right.”

“Well, in Sydney, you know, a man has to protect himself agin' these interviewers. If you sham stone deaf, it helps to keep 'em off.” He related his discreditable experiences in Moiriland, and his adventures in New Guinea. His revelations became more confidential, more interesting, more unprintable. He represented himself as a sentimental but unprincipled vagabond, and he libelled all the best-known writers and journalists in Sydney. He gave a full and brilliant account of a spree which he had enjoyed with a well-known editor who is generally credited with a demeanour of almost puritanic severity. He was carried away by the torrent of his own eloquence, and the volcanic flow of his lurid unveracity swept over politicians, actresses and the clergy. Nothing daunted him. He was the most superb liar I have ever met.

When he was tired, and we could no longer supply him with any more names to hang his purple stories on, he abruptly bade us good night; and in a few moments no sounds were to be heard save the roaring of the sea, the clicking of the sinking fire, ‘Arry's deep and regular breathing, and the snoring of “Henry Lawson.”

J. Le Gay Brereton