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“The Drover’s Wife”: Celebrating or Demystifying Bush Mythology?

The essay aims to show the cultural, aesthetic and identificatory displacements at work in the successive revisions and reinterpretations of Henry Lawson’s “drover’s wife” figure who became a national icon right away. It is quite interesting to note the surprising abstract and bare nature of both the figure and the bush, even in Lawson’s original short story. They seem to crystallize national character precisely because they leave it rather unspecified and open to interpretation, except as a struggle to cope with one’s adopted land and the acceptance of possible failure.

“The Drover’s Wife” is both a household classic in Australian literature and an archetypal figure in the Australian canon of representative national types. As such, a close scrutiny of both the original short story by one of the founding fathers of Australian literature, namely Henry Lawson, and its successive rewritings or adaptations, is very illuminating with regard to the importance of the figure itself and its problematic nature as a national icon.

This essay will focus on three successive versions of the national figure which all share a highly visual impact: Henry Lawson’s Hemingway-like behaviourist tale was published in 1892, Russell Drysdale’s dream-like painting was produced in 1945 and Murray Bail’s grotesque rewriting of the original short story, with its obsessive search for a flesh-and-blood drover’s wife, came out in 1975. With each new version, there is a reappraisal of both the character of the drover’s wife and the idea of a national type exemplifying courage, endurance and self-sacrifice. The three works are centered on national myth-making as a matter of imagination, in other words as a process of producing images, whether an allegory for Lawson, surrealist symbols for Drysdale or a wild goose chase after the original for Bail.

In all three works, the notion of point of view and horizon is central to the reader’s own vision and interpretation of the drover’s wife. The ultimate demystification of the myth is offered by a short story inspired by the other three works, namely Moorhouse’s ludicrous mock-academic paper in which the archetype of the “drover’s wife” suffers a last fatal blow as it is turned into a national joke.

The reason why the original short story has been so often adapted and readapted from one generation to the next is that the drover’s wife belongs to a host of bush figures sharing basic characteristics of the Bush legend which historian Russel Ward famously identified in his book *The Australian Legend*. As a matter of fact, in Lawson’s version, the Bush is more of a theatrical backdrop than an element of distinctively Australian local colour: it is a pretext to showcase bush virtues but in a feminine guise.

Lawson’s Bush Mythology: An Allegory of Human Courage and Endurance

There is an interesting paradox in the presentation of the bush in Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife.” Indeed, despite the fact that Lawson is considered one of the main founders of the Australian Bush mythology, and his highly popular “Drover’s Wife” is often

cited as a canonical example, his description of the bush is surprisingly abstract and bare. In his study of Australian short stories from the end of the nineteenth century to the late 1940s, Bennett underlines the fact that the bush seems to be taken for granted as if everybody knew what was being referred to without any need of further specification (165). Lawson's text was first published in 1892 in the nationalist Sydney-based magazine *The Bulletin* which offered its readers short stories, ballads or poems about distinctively Australian places set in the "bush" or "outback," places that served as a repository of associated virtues and images typical of the new life of the Australian pioneer.

When the bush is first mentioned in the second paragraph of the story, it appears as a place of negations and a rather vague setting:

Bush all round – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple-trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilisation – a shanty on the main road. (195)¹

Such a description is devoid of any particular impression that a visitor would have when passing by the drover's wife's house. The landscape does not offer itself to the narrator's gaze – or the reader's gaze for that matter. There is no horizon, as if no one could place himself in such a place. Such a description contradicts all our expectations in denying the presence of any significant shape or presence: "the country is flat. No ranges in the distance." Another point of interest is its grimness, the very opposite of a Garden of Eden. The first natural element to strike the visitor's eye is the "apple-trees" but they are "stunted and rotten" as if to suggest the Eve-like "drover's wife" of the title has already eaten of the forbidden fruit.² To that extent such a representation runs counter to what the new generation of native-born Australians of the 1890s projected onto Australia as a land of plenty and an ideal pastoral place.

Comparing Lawson's description with popular iconographic representations of the bush at the time, one cannot but be struck by the stark contrasts. In Streeton's *Purple Noon's Transparent Might*, a painting contemporaneous with Lawson's short story which historian Richard White considers as expressing the "ultimate Australian sentiment" about the bush (107), there is definitely a horizon: it is framed by ranges in the distance. Fertility is indicated by the river which occupies centre stage, and gives to it an undeniable depth of perspective in flowing from the bottom left to the upper middle right. On the contrary, in Lawson's short story, the creek is "narrow" and "waterless," and all elements are presented on the same indistinct plane. In Streeton's painting there are also majestic trees on each side of the river instead of the sparse and ghostly personified trees in Lawson's story ("a few she-oaks which are sighing"). All these elements, the horizon, the river and the trees orienting the viewer's gaze towards the top right-hand corner of the picture suggest a sense of both serenity and opportunity.

1. All quotations from Lawson's, Bail's and Moorhouse's "Drover's Wife" short stories are from Carmel Bird's *Australian Short Stories*.

2. John Thieme actually describes the drover's wife as an "Eve in a postlapsarian Eden," (70) fighting a serpent which is obviously meant to represent the Biblical evil creature. The tale thus reverses Christian gender representations by giving the female character a heroic status while the masculine Adam-like figure is nowhere to be found (71).

In Lawson's short story, the reader is never given such a sense of a hopeful or simply dynamic horizon. The main plot is reduced to a very cramped space, the kitchen on the side of the main house where the drover's wife and her children have found refuge after a snake slipped under the house. Together with the dog and the eldest boy, the mother stares at the wall separating them from the rest of the house, waiting for the snake to reappear. She finally kills it with a stick with the help of the dog.

The other references to the bush are given in a series of memories that come to the mind of the drover's wife as she is waiting for the snake. All the episodes are narrated in a mode that is both comical and graphic; they read like vignettes that could easily be drawn to illustrate Australian values such as stoicism, resourcefulness and courage with one slight unexpected distortion of the national type: the bushman or drover is now replaced by a female figure, the "drover's wife," who happens to share the exact same characteristics.

All the purple patches of Australian frontier folklore are present: fire fighting, floods, mad bullocks and evil swagmen. But there is one passage which is more original, shedding a personal light on bush life. It is an outdoor scene, and there are very few such scenes in the whole text, except for the heroic memories mentioned above. As such it cannot but arrest the reader's attention and gaze in a peculiar and eerie way:

All days are much the same to her; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. There is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet. You might walk for twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind, unless you are a bushman. This is because of the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees – that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ship can sail – and further. (200)

The emphasis on sameness, the idea of a ritual and the lack of perspective, whether literally or symbolically, are noticeable in this excerpt, all the more so as, lyricism and lavish details about the pristine beauty of the bush were commonly found in *Bulletin* poems and ballads. In his highly popular poems "Clancy of the Overflow" or "The Man from Snowy River," Banjo Paterson evoked endless vistas, wild rides in the bush, but in Lawson's "Drover's wife" there is no such sense of freedom, vastness or openness. The only suggested vanishing point is an elsewhere, an unidentified place far from the bush where "a man [might] travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ship can sail – and further."

Lawson's representation of the bush does not celebrate the place as endowed with sublime grandeur, or as a perfect measuring-stick for the heroic qualities of the drover. He depicts the bush as a place of trial where man learns humility and courage when faced with adversity. There he is suddenly made aware of his insignificance, what Australian historian Manning Clark famously called his "only glory on earth," as if all prospects were blocked both literally and visually speaking, with no horizon or vanishing point, but also, figuratively, with no real possibility of success or glory, except as a form of resignation and stoicism when faced with "defeat and failure":

Here nature was so hostile, so brutish that men in time believed that God had cursed both man and the country itself, and hence its barrenness, its sterility, its unsuitability for the arts of civilized human beings, [...] [I]n Australia the spirit of the place makes a man

aware of his insignificance, of his impotence in the presence of such harsh environment [...] Australians knew from of old that the only glory men know on earth is how they respond to defeat and failure. (Clark 20)

One particularly intriguing characteristic of the tale is the narrator's apparent lack of concern or feeling for the plight of the drover's wife. But far from diminishing the grandeur of the female heroic figure, it reinforces her courage and stoicism all the more. It also enhances the dramatic tension and emotional intensity of the text.

Narrative focalisation features another point of interest. The reader is invited to look at the scene through other eyes than the perception of the drover's wife, which implicitly suggests she does not show any emotions. The successive episodes are seen either through the children's eyes, or the dog's, or even the cat's. Such unexpected vantage points add a very personal touch to the tale, making it lighter but also more poignant, paradoxically. This technique is used in the most trying moments, when the mother starts breaking down before being finally reinvigorated through a change of perspective either witnessed by one of her pets or initiated by it. One such instance of both comic relief and inspiration is the scene where she "[sits] down to have 'a good cry'" and then bursts out laughing when she realises the cat is now crying as well (201).

The last scene of the short story featuring mother and child is also worth analysing as far as composition and focalisation are concerned. The snake has been killed and the loyal eldest son can now relax and comfort his mother:

She lifts the mangled reptile on the point of her stick, carries it to the fire, and throws it in; then piles on the wood and watches the snake burn. The boy and the dog watch too. She lays her hand on the dog's head, and all the fierce, angry light dies out of his yellow eyes. The younger children are quieted, and presently go to sleep. The dirty-legged boy stands for a moment in his shirt, watching the fire. Presently he looks up at her, sees the tears in her eyes, and, throwing his arms around her neck exclaims:

"Mother, I won't never go drovin' blarst me if I do!"

And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush. (202)

This short passage features an interesting shift in focalisation. The mother's gaze is not mentioned, as is the case in the rest of the text, but the children's and dog's eyes are referred to. For us readers, it implies that we are invited to look through their frightened and slightly more impressionable eyes. But progressively, the dog, the children and even the eldest boy, are quietened and stop looking at the fire consuming the hellish creature – the snake. The story could end with the boy's solemn promise to his mother. But in the very last paragraph, it is as if the narrator retreated from the scene and offered the reader a more distanced vision with the reference to the bush. As there is no mention of a window or a door through which the bush could be seen, it is not clear whether the reader is supposed to visualise the inside and the outside of the kitchen simultaneously, or whether there is an opening behind the mother and her son through which the "sickly daylight" is breaking in. Be it as it may, the paragraph reads like the description of a painting which cannot but evoke holy representations of the Madonna and child: "And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush" (202). The presence of natural daylight in Madonna and Child scenes was a *topos* in Renaissance paintings with a window in the background opening onto a serene landscape. The only jarring note here is the quality

of the light, a "sickly light" instead of a holy halo, as if in setting the first stone to the myth-making around drovers and their wives, Lawson could not help suggesting such an allegory of courage, self-sacrifice and stoicism in the bush was all the more extraordinary and praiseworthy as it might not be ultimately illuminated by any holy light but only shrouded by a very human "sickly light."

And yet there is a definite aura around the figure of the drover's wife as she is turned into an almost sacred allegory of bush courage. In Drysdale's painting produced in 1945, the figure is still imposing and prominent but its aura has become more eerie, almost problematic. This is the first of a series of attempts to both celebrate and demystify the national icon. What's more, just as in Lawson's initial short story, the representation of the bush is surprisingly elusive and ambivalent, offering no real horizon either to the protagonists featured on the canvas or to the beholder. And this is such a difficult relationship with the land that Drysdale's reinterpretation of the drover's wife figure and the nondescript bush really illustrate. Instead of offering the viewer an idealised and optimistic vision of the Australian pioneer experience of displacement in the manner of the Heidelberg School, he foregrounds a sense of unbelonging and trompe-l'oeil effects.

Drysdale's Surrealist Revision

In Drysdale's painting, there is an obvious reference to Lawson's short story with the explicit use of the same title but the "drover's wife" has lost the holy aura of a Madonna. In addition, the perspective that is offered by the painter is very mysterious and problematic as not only does it deprive the drover's wife of her attributes as a national icon, but it also eventually places the viewer in an untenable position as will be demonstrated in a moment.

Lawson's drover's wife, a typical bushwoman, is strong, brave, undaunted and resourceful. In the original short story, her physical strength is symbolized by the stick; with it, she manages to master the bush and one of its most evil creatures – the snake. In the painting, on the other hand, the stick has been replaced by a cumbersome bag or suitcase, thus giving her a more mundane appearance. Instead of suggesting her mastery of the bush or her stoic acceptance of the harsh life it entails, it tends to emphasize her lack of any connection to the land except as a passing stranger, soon to move further on, were it not for her almost unnatural motionlessness and passiveness. Her massive body does not so much suggest strength as a form of indolence, not to say lethargy. Instead of looking cunning or clever in any way, her eyes seem to gaze into space with a resigned expression.

Another puzzling choice is the slight low-angle perspective which gives even more weight to the drovers' wife's bulk. She seems to be towering above the viewer. This gives the impression of a larger-than-life figure, a symbol rather than a realistic description of a rough and rugged bushwoman. One explanation for such a blatant distortion of the original drover's wife attributes might have to do with the context in which the painting was produced. One should bear in mind the painter had accepted a commission by the *Sydney Morning Herald* to document the dramatic drought that devastated western New South Wales in 1944. As a result the allegorical dimension of the figure is still present but in a much more disillusioned key which has more to do with the mock-heroic mode than national myth-making.

There is one last intriguing point though, an apparent contradiction in terms of composition, which is less easily accounted for. When one looks at the figure of the drover in the background, the low-angle perspective affecting the female figure seems to have disappeared. Besides, the difference in size between the two figures would require more distance between them than the one we visually perceive. The woman's shadow covers more than two thirds of the distance separating them, which would suggest he is much nearer than he actually is. Such visual contradictions give the impression the drover's wife has been pasted onto the canvas, as if the painter had used a *trompe l'oeil* technique. The main subject of the painting thus remains elusive and mysterious. The position of the viewer is also unexpectedly rendered problematic, as he could not possibly look at the drover and his wife simultaneously: he would then have to occupy two different places. Lastly, the fact that the drover's wife appears to gaze at some point in the direction of the viewer but higher up is slightly unsettling, as if to suggest that the real meaning of the painting is to be found elsewhere, beyond the frame, maybe in some sort of national unconscious still to be defined. There is no doubt Drysdale was influenced by surrealism and cubism in his playing with perspective and an elusive symbolism. But more importantly, he managed to capture in his paintings the sense of unbelonging of the non-indigenous Australian, whether man or woman, away from the stereotyped nationalist representations of the drover and the bush which had so much contributed to the *Bulletin's* success. The figure in the background whom, by way of inference, we expect to be the drover, is only a man driving a wagon drawn by two horses; he could be a drover on the move with his wife but there is no sign of his cattle, and no obvious reason why the two figures should appear so estranged from each other, separated as they are by the long distance. The resulting sense of mystery, the incongruities informing the painting are the object of Murray Bail's adaptation of the story in 1975.

Bail's Undermining of the Subject and Exemplarity of the Drover's Wife

Murray Bail's story is in fact a comical reflection on the links between Lawson's and Drysdale's versions of the iconic drover's wife on the one hand, and the runaway wife of a rather unimaginative and unromantic dentist living in Adelaide on the other. He claims the picture was painted after his wife Hazel left him and their two children, to elope with a passing drover. The constant juxtaposition of their very ordinary and predictable family life with the archetypal figure of the drover's wife hollows out the myth of all its heroic grandeur. From the dentist's narrow perspective, the imposing national icon has dwindled into an insignificant, brainless and frustrated housewife.

The only remaining features of the prototypical drover's wife, her strength and large build, do not give her any heroic status but are systematically presented in a ridiculous way. When she chops wood or carries heavy things like a drover would and like Lawson's drover's wife did, the dentist only remembers the "sweat patches under her arms" (52). There is even a short rewriting of the snake episode but it is told as a trivial anecdote and bathos replaces the biblical undertones of Lawson's story. When one reads the two episodes in succession, the contrast is striking:

An evil pair of small, bright bead-like eyes glisten at one of these holes. The snake – a black one – comes slowly out, [...] Thud, thud comes the woman's club on the ground.

Alligator [the dog] pulls again. Thud, thud. Alligator gives another pull and he has the snake out – a black brute, five feet long. He shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind. (Lawson 202)

And then of course she killed that snake down at the beach shack we took one Christmas. I happened to lift the lid of the incinerator – a black brute, its head bashed in. "It was under the house," she explained.

It was a two-roomed shack, bare floorboards. It had a primus stove, and an asbestos toilet down the back. Hazel didn't mind. Quite the contrary; when it came time to leave she was downcast. I had to be at town for work. (Bail 52)

The Biblical snake emblematic of the "original curse" has turned into a "black brute" negligently killed and dumped in the incinerator. The cleansing symbolism of the fire in Lawson's story has been replaced by a mundane "incinerator." The unity of place which gave the original story so much dramatic tension and heroic grandeur is also undermined here with the reference to the "asbestos toilet down the back" as if to systematically prevent any edifying interpretation on the part of the reader. There is no more horizon or vanishing point than in Lawson's allegory but the irruption of trivial elements cluttering the stage-like setting (incinerator, asbestos toilet, etc.) keeps suggesting the only interpretive horizon offered to the reader is so ridiculously grotesque it is not worth investigating.

As to the stoicism of either the drover or his wife, it is deflated as it is only mentioned in relation to Hazel and her indifference to "bush flies": "Hazel of course accepted everything without a song and dance. She didn't mind the heat, or the flies" (52). Concerning the drover, the man the dentist imagines his wife Hazel eloped with, we do not learn anything about him except that he "didn't say much," which perfectly matches the taciturnity historian Russel Ward identified as typical of the Australian "national character":

National character is not, as was once held, something inherited; nor is it, on the other hand, entirely a figment of the imagination of poets, publicists and other feckless dreamers. It is rather a people's idea of itself and this stereotype, though often absurdly romanticised or exaggerated, is always connected with reality in two ways. It springs largely from a people's past experiences, and it often modifies current events by colouring men's ideas of how they ought "typically" to behave.

According to the myth the "typical Australian" is a practical man [...] he is usually taciturn rather than talkative, one who endures stoically rather than one who acts busily. (1-2)

But the narrator seems to voluntarily hollow out the drover figure, all the same as he pointedly underlines his elusive nature. According to him Drysdale undermined his very identity in reducing him to a "silhouette," a "completely black figure," which introduces unwelcome ambiguity: "In Drysdale's picture he is a silhouette. A completely black figure. He could have been an Aboriginal; by the late forties I understand some were employed as drovers" (51). It is as if every avenue of interpretation offered by the narrator kept blurring both Drysdale's painting and Lawson's tale.

Bearing in mind that any landscape is above all a vision and a horizon,³ it is revealing that in Bail's version of the bush, there should be no such "landscaping" of the out-back. If anything, the bush recedes further and further away and eventually dissolves

3. French philosopher Michel Collot wrote extensively on the subject of landscape, and declared that landscape and horizon were inseparable: "No landscape without a horizon" (11).

into undecidability. The dentist narrator usurps the viewer's position and thus imposes his own vision and horizon to the reader. In so doing he does not solve the dilemma of the problematic horizon we pointed out earlier on – the impossibility for the drover to stand so far on the horizon line if we are to accept the drover's wife's apparent closeness to us. He actually does the exact opposite by denying the horizon its realistic function: "The picture gives little away though. It is the outback – but where exactly? South Australia? It could easily be Queensland, Western Australia, the Northern Territory. We don't know. You could never find that spot" (50). The narrator multiplies the number of possible places where to situate a vantage point from which to view the scene, and thus presents them as equally unconvincing. The bush, but also the ideal "spot" from which to see it and represent it, keep their elusiveness.

Even the final tableau, which is an obvious echo of Lawson's original ending, is deprived of any horizon. The bush has turned into a pathetic cardboard background devoid of any depth, used a prop to foreground two insignificant characters: "I recall the drover as a thin head in a khaki hat, not talkative, with dusty boots. He is indistinct. Is it him? I don't know. Hazel – it is Hazel and the rotten landscape that dominate everything" (53). As a matter of fact, only the drover's wife is really given prominence, as if to suggest, in a typically postmodern way, that the ultimate interpretation of any landscape, painting or short story, lies with the viewer's or reader's own horizon of expectations. The other interesting point to note is the emphasis on colour and corruption to refer to the bush ("the rotten landscape"). Just as in Lawson's short story and in Drysdale's painting, there is no heroic or invigorating light, only a sickly, eerie, rotten blur.

In all three works, Lawson's, Drysdale's and Bail's, the bush is presented in a quite abstract, indistinct and negative way, as if to foreground the notion of heroic survival in a hostile environment which characterises so much of Australian literature. The surprising absence or relative invisibility of the drover points in each case to the glaring omission of what is supposed to characterise the national character, even more than courage, stoicism and resourcefulness, namely mateship. Shedding light on the drover's female mate instead of his mates is a sure way to reverse the usual horizon of expectations of readers, and to make them ponder such an absence. In an ultimate parodic reinterpretation of the drover's wife figure, Moorhouse has the national icon turn into a sheep the drover regularly has sex with, so as to relieve his natural needs. This is the last stage in a process of successive questionings of the "Drover's Wife" as a national heroic icon. The obsessive search for national symbols has finally become a simple farce. But Lawson's original short story also gave birth to other "drover's wife" stories written by women writers in the 1980s and the 1990s which are sufficient proof the drover's wife figure still has current value, if only in serving as a pretext to redefine gendered roles.⁴ It remains to be seen whether such a national icon could also spawn gay, indigenous, or even Chinese rewritings in the future to determine whether the figure will survive in the pantheon of national figures or progressively disappear. Judging by Nikki Gemmell's appeal to her as a character forceful enough to be a source of inspiration for all political female figures, and Julia Gillard in particular, the "glorious Aussie archetype" will no doubt stand her ground for quite some time, if only as a positive role model for

4. See Barbara Jefferis' "The Drover's Wife" (1980) and Mandy Sayer's "The Drover's Wife" (1996).

Australian women: “What a gal she is. A specifically Aussie chick. Resilient, outspoken, stoic – and respected for being as assertive as the men.”⁵

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5. “They make ’em tough, those Aussie chicks. Back then and now. That deliciously steely, no-nonsense archetype holding her own against the blokes goes back a long way in Australian folklore. She’s called the Drover’s Wife and she’s rightly celebrated. Read about her in Henry Lawson’s story; gaze at all her sturdy glory in Russell Drysdale’s painting [...]. What a gal she is. A specifically Aussie chick. Resilient, outspoken, stoic – and respected for being as assertive as the men” (Gemmell n.p.).