



Portrayal of Bush in the Works of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson: A Comparative Analysis

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Keywords:

Australian bush stories,
bulletin bush, idealized

ABSTRACT

The "Bulletin Debate" was a well-known argument between Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, two of Australia's most well-known authors and poets, that appeared in The Bulletin magazine. Poems that were produced between 1892 and 1893 discussing the benefits of living in the Australian "bush" served as the medium for discussion. The Bulletin, a well-liked and powerful newspaper at the period, frequently promoted the common national self-image that many Australians held—sometimes referred to as the "bush legend." Many Australian poets and writers, like Banjo Paterson, had a penchant to romanticise bush life despite their primary urban bases. However, Henry Lawson, a well-known poet and writer of his day, criticised the conventional "romanticised" portrayal of bush life.

The vast and frequently harsh Australian bush has been a major motif in the country's literary works. Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson are two of the most significant authors who have immortalised the bush in their writings. Despite being contemporaries, their interpretations of the bush differ significantly due to differences in their personal histories, social classes, and writing styles. This essay compares and contrasts Lawson's and Paterson's depictions of the bush, examining how the two artists' divergent viewpoints speak to larger cultural and ideological undercurrents in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The "real" Australia—where is it? Is it limited to the "Outback" or the "bush"? Is it in the heart of the continent, in the red desert? Is that Sydney Harbour with the Opera House and the Bridge on either side? Is it amid Bondi Beach's surfers and sun worshippers? The Western Australian mines, rich and heaping? Victoria's gold towns, teeming with colonial architecture? All of these sites are, of course, the "real" Australia. However, discussions over the real Australia have been going on for a while. Henry Lawson wrote a poem named "Borderland" in the nationalist publication *The Bulletin* in 1892. In it, he subtly attacked the romantic bush poetry of writers like A.B. "Banjo" Paterson by contrasting the realities of living in the woods with the pictures painted in poems.

These two guys were A-list celebrities in their own right. Banjo, a vagabond who loved the outdoors and was averse to commitment, was employed as a journalist, poet, war correspondent, and solicitor. Despite never quite managing to live the pastoral dream himself, he was raised in the bush. He was the son of an Australian-born mother and a Scottish immigrant father. He was enrolled in Sydney Grammar School in 1874; at the age of sixteen, he left to work as a law clerk, then as a solicitor. His first poem, "El Mahdi to the Australian Troops," which criticised the British war in February 1885, was published in *The Bulletin* while he was still a law student.

Henry Lawson was a famous poet who was born in 1867 on the goldfields of New South Wales. His primary profession was writing, but he was also known to have struggled with drinking and mental illness, receiving multiple treatments in mental hospitals. He penned the poem "The Unknown Patient" while he was a patient at the Thomas Walker Convalescent Hospital in Concord West. In addition, he was imprisoned in Darlinghurst Gaol for multiple terms as a result of intoxication, childlessness, and non-payment of child support. These days, such behaviour is a little more acknowledged for what it is, and many of the great poets had comparable issues. Adam Lindsay Gordon was one of the Australians among them. Lawson was a realist more so in terms of arrived in the nation, possibly as a result of having actually lived there for a fair amount of time.

Henry Lawson and Andrew Barton "Banjo" Paterson, two of Australia's most well-known writers and poets, engaged in a well-known argument in *The Bulletin* magazine between 1892 and 1893. Although the debate appears to be about the relative advantages of the City and the Bush, it really serves as an example of the conflict between views from the higher and lower classes. Australia was forging its political and social identity prior to Federation. Social and political tensions were greatly influenced by events like the Queensland shearers strike, the Great Depression, and the drought. Consequently, the

distinctive picture of the Australian Bushman, which was prominently represented in the literature of the day, especially *The Bulletin*, started to acquire new connotations in light of the class perspective.

Henry Lawson's Bush: A Harsh Reality

Henry Lawson's depiction of the bush is often bleak and unforgiving. His stories and poems frequently emphasize the harshness and isolation of bush life, portraying it as a place of struggle and endurance. Lawson's works, such as "The Drover's Wife" and "In a Dry Season," focus on the hardships faced by individuals living in the bush, particularly women, who are often depicted as resilient yet burdened by the relentless environment. Lawson's bush is a place where human survival is constantly tested, and where the romanticism often associated with the Australian landscape is stripped away to reveal a more sobering reality.

Lawson's personal experiences of poverty and hardship greatly influenced his portrayal of the bush. His works often reflect his socialist leanings and his sympathy for the working class, as seen in his stories about shearers, swagmen, and drovers. In these depictions, the bush becomes a symbol of the struggles faced by ordinary Australians, and Lawson's tone is often one of disillusionment and empathy. The landscape in Lawson's works is not merely a backdrop but an active force that shapes the lives and destinies of his characters.

The *Bulletin* published a poem by Lawson titled "Borderland" on July 9, 1892. The piece was later retitled "Up The Country." Lawson criticised the conventional "romanticised" picture of bush life in this poem, which opens with the verse "I am back from up the country — very sorry that I went, —" by highlighting the disparities between the idealistic poetry of the day and the realities of bush life. He expresses his dismay at not having found "the Southern poets' land" and goes on to say that "the plains are irrigated and the land is humanised" as the only conditions that could allow this idealised place to exist.

Banjo Paterson's Bush: A Romantic Vision

In contrast to Lawson's stark realism, Banjo Paterson's portrayal of the bush is more romantic and idealized. Paterson's works, including "The Man from Snowy River" and "Clancy of the Overflow," celebrate the bush as a place of adventure, heroism, and freedom. His characters are often larger-than-life figures who embody the spirit of the Australian outback—brave, resourceful, and deeply connected to the land. For Paterson, the bush is a source of national pride, and his writing reflects a deep affection for the landscape and the people who inhabit it.

Paterson's romanticized view of the bush is rooted in his background as a city-dweller and his experiences as a journalist. Unlike Lawson, Paterson's engagement with the bush was often through the lens of an outsider, which may explain his tendency to emphasize its more picturesque and heroic aspects. His portrayal of the bush is imbued with a sense of nostalgia and an idealized vision of the Australian identity, one that contrasts sharply with Lawson's more grounded and critical perspective.

In reaction to Lawson's dissatisfaction, Paterson mockingly parodies a sympathetic response in "In Defence of the Bush." With reverence, he explains the shifting of the seasons, suggesting that Lawson's lack of toughness prevents him from comprehending these changes and that he would never be a true bushman, one who "is loyal through it all." He draws a comparison between the pure bush and the "squalid" metropolis, which is home to immoral women and street children. Using the Bush against the City metaphor, Paterson expresses his social beliefs: the ideal bushman is morally upright and gracefully accepts his station in society, whereas the City encourages moral decay, especially in women.

Paterson's response to Lawson's poem, titled "In Defence of the Bush," was published on July 23, 1892. In response to Lawson's accusation that authors like Paterson were "City Bushmen," Paterson asserted that Lawson's portrayal of the bushlife was depressing. The sentence "Because the bush will never suit you, and you'll never suit the bush" perfectly sums up his poetry. Later on, additional Australian writers joined in on the discussion.

Both authors' second poems are more forceful but also display a hint of self-consciousness. Lawson's response is mostly influenced by his political and social beliefs. Lawson, "In answer to Banjo, and otherwise," mocks Paterson's "patriotic" idealist visions, calling them "British workman nonsense" and pointing out how absurd Paterson's idealised seasons are in light of the current drought. He goes on to show that Paterson's recreated bushman is comparable to city workers and also experiences the corruption of power disparity. In addition to suggesting that idealism is an unreachable "Eldorado," he also says that expressing the impossibility of something can "raise a just rebellion in the overwritten west."

By pointing out that Paterson "travelled like an agent" and that "it's doubtful that you ever saw a season in the west," he further associates Paterson with the fallacies of idealism. In reference to Paterson's role as a well-connected city counsel, he says, "you rave about the bush, but the city seems to suit you." It seems as though he is making a personal appeal to the readers in an effort to legitimise their reality, given the serious, gritty truth of this poem and especially his reply to Paterson's criticisms of the morals of inner-city women.

In his concluding remarks, Patterson takes aim at the writers who have sided with Lawson. He claims they should "take something for their livers and be cheerful for a change" in his opening satirical attack on their negativity and the poor quality of their work (Paterson, "In answer to Various Bards"). He resorted to his idealistic ideals of strength and morality because, in his own words, he could "never see the bushman through an atmosphere of gloom" and that "a man can easy stand it if he's made of sterling stuff." He suggests that Lawson and the others might as well return to England if they are in need of comfort and detest the wilderness. This debate doesn't specifically address any of Lawson's arguments, but it seems more like a defensive and self-aware attempt to discredit Lawson and win the readers over. Patterson's writing comes across as sulky or petty since he tries to change Lawson's definitions to fit his argument rather than engaging in a counterargument.

Comparative Analysis

The differing portrayals of the bush by Lawson and Paterson can be seen as reflective of broader cultural and social divides in Australian society at the time. Lawson's works resonate with the struggles of the working class and those on the margins of society, offering a critique of the romanticization of the bush by more privileged voices. In contrast, Paterson's writing, with its celebration of bush life and the iconic Australian "bushman," aligns more closely with the emerging national identity that valorized the outback as a symbol of Australian character and resilience.

While both authors are celebrated for their contributions to Australian literature, their works offer contrasting visions of the bush. Lawson's portrayal highlights the hardships and alienation experienced by those who lived in the bush, challenging the notion of the bush as a place of unqualified virtue. Paterson's works, on the other hand, reinforce the myth of the bush as the heart of the Australian spirit, emphasizing its beauty, excitement, and the camaraderie of its inhabitants.

Conclusion

The portrayal of the bush in the works of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson offers valuable insights into the complexities of Australian identity and the cultural significance of the landscape. While Lawson's depiction of the bush is marked by realism and a focus on its harsh realities, Paterson's work celebrates the bush as a place of adventure and heroism. Together, their writings capture the duality of the Australian bush as both a place of hardship and a source of national pride. This comparative analysis

underscores the importance of considering multiple perspectives in understanding the cultural narratives that shape our perception of the landscape and the people who inhabit it.

The conclusions on both sides, while ostensibly conciliatory, give clear summaries of the two opposing views. Lawson suggests their argument is not in keeping with “the spirit of the times” and suggests they “go together droving and returning if we live, try to understand each other while we liquor up the div”. The idea of two men of opposing class views uniting in understanding and celebration parallels his belief in the empowerment of people through action in unity. Paterson however argues for retaining the status quo, “there are some that like the city and there are some that like the bush” and that “we’ll work our own salvation with the stoutest hearts we may”.

In 1939, Banjo Paterson recalled his thoughts about The Bulletin debate:

Henry Lawson was a man of remarkable insight in some things and of extraordinary simplicity in others. We were both looking for the same reef, if you get what I mean; but I had done my prospecting on horseback with my meals cooked for me, while Lawson has done his prospecting on foot and had had to cook for himself. Nobody realised this better than Lawson; and one day he suggested that we should write against each other, he putting the bush from his point of view, and I putting it from mine (276).

There was never any clear “winner” to this debate. However, Paterson presented Australia with the desired image of its national identity, and his short story collections received spectacular sales. In 1993, Paterson replaced Lawson as the poet depicted on the Australian ten-dollar note.

It is somewhat curious that, despite their vastly differing perspectives on Australian bush life, both Lawson and Paterson are often mentioned alongside each other as Australia’s most iconic and influential writers. Both authors experienced the bush in their youth but moved to Sydney while still young. Lawson was the son of a struggling bushman with a small holding near Bathurst. After his parent’s marriage dissolved he moved to Sydney with his mother, Louisa, where due to his limited education he struggled to earn a living.

Paterson, the son of a wealthy pastoralist, was sent to Sydney Grammar School and subsequently qualified as a solicitor. The opposing class views of the authors is clear in their writing with Paterson idealizing bush life and Lawson focusing on the difficult circumstances of ordinary working people.

Interestingly, it was only after this debate that Lawson packed his swag and spent 6 months working in shearing sheds around Bourke, probably the first time he had ever been west of Bathurst

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