**Landscape and Identity in Australian Poetry *Phil Lazzaro lecture notes***

Our identity is influenced by a great varietyof elements that involve our person directly or indirectly. One of the most influential of these is Language both Written and Oral. The language may be our mother tongue (the language/s that we are born with) but also the languages we choose to acquire. This is because acquiring a language usually entails an unavoidable encounter with, and an adoption (to varying degrees) of the Culture of that Language, and, of course, Culture is very strongly related to one’s Identity.

Poetry is the highest form of expression in any language. Therefore, by looking at the poetry of a language, one might be able to extrapolate quite a lot about the identity of a group of people. Poets tend to be a voice (positive or negative) of a society in which they are living. Their hopes, views, observations, criticisms, delusions, fears, regarding the world around (and within) them is often a snapshot and an expression (albeit personal) of that society.

Landscape is one of the strongest inspirational sources for poetry writing, and the landscape of a country is extremely important in influencing and shaping our personal identity. Landscape in Epic poetry from our various countries has had a very powerful influence in shaping even national identities, as we shall see through a selection of Australian poems.

**A little history**

‘The Great Southern Land’, or ‘Terra Australis’, as Australia was known, was imagined much, much before it was settled in 1788. It was celebrated by English poets before Australia produced its own. There were 2 types of celebratory poems:

**Popular and Vernacular**  **Learned and Literary**

Songs, ballads, skits Odes and narratives

Convicts and first settlers Based on European cultural heritage

Musical, funny, vulgar Use of heightened, refined language

Anonymous, experiential, ephemeral Expressed confidence in progress of the

British civilization.

The most well-known Australian poets attempted to merge the two types achieving lyrical, confident romantic and nostalgic effects. In the late 1800s Australia was still a colony of Britain. The currency was the British pound and its flag was still the Union Jack. However the idea of Federation in the colony had already been ignited in the 1860s. A Republican movement was under way and it brought to Federation in1901. When young Henry Lawson was writing in the 1880s, the concept of a representative government in Australia was still just an ‘idea’ in the minds of his young peers. In his first published poem, Lawson was already alluding to the idea of **Belonging** to a place. Young people either first or second generation, born of British parents were trying to understand which country they really belonged to and how to refer to themselves; as British subjects or as Australians?

1

**A song of the Republic** Henry Lawson*The Bulletin, Oct 1887*

Sons of the South, awake! arise!   
Sons of the South, and do.   
Banish from under your bonny skies   
Those old-world errors and wrongs and lies.   
Making a hell in a Paradise   
That belongs to your sons and you.   
  
Sons of the South, make choice between   
(Sons of the South, choose true),   
The Land of Morn and the Land of Eden,   
The Old Dead Tree and the Young Tree Green,   
The Land that belongs to the lord and the Queen,   
And the Land that belongs to you.   
  
Sons of the South, your time will come   
Sons of the South, 'tis near   
The "Signs of the Times", in their language dumb,   
Foretell it, and ominous whispers hum   
Like sullen sounds of a distant drum,   
In the ominous atmosphere.   
  
Sons of the South, aroused at last!   
Sons of the South are few!   
But your ranks grow longer and deeper fast,   
And ye shall swell to an army vast,   
And free from the wrongs of the North and Past   
The land that belongs to you.

This was Henry Lawson’s first published poem written at the age of 21. It was the first public text to really promote and encourage brotherhood and equality with such strong sentiment. This poem introduced for the first time the idea of an ‘Australian Identity’, cultivating a feeling of detachment from the past greed and the deplorable mistakes made by England on this new continent. He introduced a feeling of belonging to a new place, both physical and conceptual. Connecting to the Australian landscape (so different to the old country) served this purpose for many young Australian artists, writers and poets.

**The Land: Intimidating**

Even today one of the strongest elements on the Australian psyche is **The Land**. Is this because Australia’s literature has made it so? Or is this so despite it?

Henry Lawson had travelled extensively throughout the Australian bush (countryside). He witnessed and experienced the harsh realities, the droughts and the inhospitable dangers that were common to farmers. Country folk connected with the images he portrayed. These sketches also appealed to the imagination of city folk who were enchanted by the idea of a rugged but honest and un-spoilt Australian character, brave, determined and striving to survive in unforgiving natural elements. Other poems are**:** Flag of the Southern Cross (1887)**,** Andy’s gone with Cattle (date)**,** The Drover’s Wife (1892).

2

These intimidating qualities of the land were to persist in Henry Lawson’s poems and short stories. His poems had no space for romantic illusions of the Australian landscape. In fact, he alludes to the flawed romantic images that earlier poets (Southern Poets) used. He referred to these poets as ‘City Bushmen’.

**Up The Country** Henry Lawson *The Bulletin, July 1892*

I am back from up the country, very sorry that I went    
Seeking for the Southern poets' land whereon to pitch my tent;   
I have lost a lot of idols, which were broken on the track,   
Burnt a lot of fancy verses, and I'm glad that I am back.   
Further out may be the pleasant scenes of which our poets boast,   
But I think the country's rather more inviting round the coast.   
Anyway, I'll stay at present at a boarding-house in town,   
Drinking beer and lemon-squashes, taking baths and cooling down.   
  
`Sunny plains'! Great Scott! Those **burning** **wastes** of **barren soil and sand**  
With their everlasting fences stretching out across the land!   
**Desolation** where the crow is! Desert where the eagle flies,   
Paddocks where the looney bullock starts and stares with **reddened eyes**;   
Where, in clouds of dust enveloped, **roasted bullock-drivers** creep   
Slowly past the **sun-dried shepherd** dragged behind his crawling sheep.   
**Stunted** peak of granite gleaming, **glaring** like a molten mass   
Turned from some **infernal furnace** on a plain **devoid of grass**.   
  
Miles and miles of thirsty gutters, strings of muddy water-holes   
In the place of `shining rivers', `walled by cliffs and forest boles.'   
**Barren** ridges, gullies, ridges! Where the ever-**maddening flies**   
**Fiercer** than the plagues of Egypt **swarm** about your blighted eyes!   
Bush! Where there is **no horizon**! Where the **buried bushman sees**   
Nothing, nothing! But the **sameness** of the **ragged**, stunted trees!   
Lonely hut where **drought's eternal, suffocating** atmosphere   
Where the **God-forgotten** hatter dreams of city life and beer.   
  
Treacherous tracks that trap the stranger, endless roads that gleam and glare,   
Dark and evil-looking gullies, hiding secrets here and there!   
Dull dumb flats and stony rises, where the toiling bullocks bake,  
And the sinister `goanna', and the lizard, and the snake.   
Land of day and night, no morning freshness, and no afternoon,   
When the great white sun in rising bringeth summer heat in June.   
Dismal country for the exile, when the shades begin to fall   
From the sad heart-breaking sunset, to the new-chum worst of all. 

3

Dreary land in rainy weather, with the endless clouds that drift   
O'er the bushman like a blanket that the Lord will never lift    
Dismal land when it is raining, growl of floods, and, oh! The whoosh   
Of the rain and wind together on the dark bed of the bush   
Ghastly fires in lonely humpies where the granite rocks are piled   
In the rain-swept wildernesses that are wildest of the wild.   
  
Land where gaunt and haggard women live alone and work like men,   
Till their husbands, gone a-droving, will return to them again:   
Homes of men! if home had ever such a God-forgotten place,   
Where the wild selector's children fly before a stranger's face.   
Home of tragedy applauded by the dingoes' dismal yell,   
Heaven of the shanty-keeper, fitting fiend for such a hell   
And the wallaroos and wombats, and, of course, the curlew's call   
And the lone sundowner tramping ever onward through it all!

I am back from up the country, up the country where I went   
Seeking for the Southern poets' land whereon to pitch my tent;   
I have shattered many idols out along the dusty track,   
Burnt a lot of fancy verses, and I'm glad that I am back.   
I believe the Southern poets' dream will not be realised   
Till the plains are irrigated and the land is humanized.   
I intend to stay at present, as I said before, in town   
Drinking beer and lemon-squashes, taking baths and cooling down.

**The Bush Controversy**

***In Defence of the Bush*** is a popular poem by [Australian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australia) writer and poet [Andrew Barton "Banjo" Paterson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banjo_Paterson). It was first published in reply to fellow poet [Henry Lawson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Lawson)'s poem, [*Up The Country*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Up_The_Country)*.* Paterson's rebuttal sparked what is known in Australia as the [Bulletin Debate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_Debate), a series of poems by both Lawson and Paterson about the true nature of life in the Australian bush.

In [*Up The Country*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Up_The_Country)*,* Lawson had criticised some city poets calling them "[The City Bushmen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_City_Bushman)" and who tended to romanticise bush life. One such poet was Banjo Paterson, who, in turn, accused Lawson of representing bush life as nothing but doom and gloom, famously ending his poem with the line *"For the bush will never suit you, and you'll never suit the bush."*

4

**The Land: Mysterious and welcoming**

**In Defence of the Bush** Banjo Paterson *The Bulletin, July 1892*

So you're back from up the country, Mister Lawson, where you went,   
And you're cursing all the business in a bitter discontent;   
Well, we grieve to disappoint you, and it makes us sad to hear   
That it wasn't cool and shady -- and there wasn't whips of beer,   
And the looney bullock snorted when you first came into view    
Well, you know it's not so often that he sees a swell like you;   
And the roads were hot and dusty, and the plains were burnt and brown,   
And no doubt you're better suited drinking lemon-squash in town.   
Yet, perchance, if you should journey down the very track you went   
In a month or two at furthest, you would wonder what it meant;   
Where the sun-baked earth was gasping like a creature in its pain   
You would find the grasses waving like a field of summer grain,   
And the miles of thirsty gutters, blocked with sand and choked with mud,   
You would find them mighty rivers with a turbid, sweeping flood.   
For the rain and drought and sunshine make no changes in the street,   
In the sullen line of buildings and the ceaseless tramp of feet;   
But the bush has moods and changes, as the seasons rise and fall,   
And the men who know the bush-land -- they are loyal through it all.    
  
But you found the bush was dismal and a land of no delight    
Did you chance to hear a chorus in the shearers' huts at night?   
Did they 'rise up William Riley' by the camp-fire's cheery blaze?   
Did they rise him as we rose him in the good old droving days?   
And the women of the homesteads and the men you chanced to meet    
Were their faces sour and saddened like the 'faces in the street'?   
And the 'shy selector children' -- were they better now or worse   
Than the little city urchins who would greet you with a curse?   
Is not such a life much better than the squalid street and square   
Where the fallen women flaunt it in the fierce electric glare,   
Where the seamstress plies her needle till her eyes are sore and red   
In a filthy, dirty attic toiling on for daily bread?   
Did you hear no sweeter voices in the music of the bush   
Than the roar of trams and buses, and the war-whoop of 'the push'?   
Did the magpies rouse your slumbers with their carol sweet and strange?   
Did you hear the silver chiming of the bell-birds on the range?   
But, perchance, the wild birds' music by your senses was despised,   
For you say you'll stay in townships till the bush is civilized.   
Would you make it a tea-garden, and on Sundays have a band   
Where the 'blokes' might take their 'donahs', with a 'public' close at hand?   
You had better stick to Sydney and make merry with the 'push',   
For the bush will never suit you, and you'll never suit the bush.

5

Patterson continued to write poetry that gave people a sense of romance, adventure and freedom in the enormous Australian outback. *The Wind’s Message* is one such poem.

**The Wind’s Message** B. Patterson *1895*

There came a **whisper** down the Bland between the dawn and dark,  
Above the tossing of the pines, above the **river's flow**;  
It **stirred the boughs** of giant gums and stalwart ironbark;  
It **drifted** where the wild ducks played amid the swamps below;  
It **brought a breath of mountain air** from off the hills of pine,  
A **scent** of eucalyptus trees in **honey-laden bloom**;  
And drifting, drifting far away along the southern line  
It caught from leaf and grass and fern a subtle strange perfume.  
  
It reached the **toiling city folk**, but **few there** were that heard.   
The **rattle** of their **busy life** had **choked the whisper down**;  
And some but caught a *fresh-blown breeze* with *scent of pine* that *stirred*  
A *thought of blue hills* far away beyond the **smoky town**;  
And others *heard the whisper pass*, but **could not understand**  
The *magic of the breeze's breath that set their hearts aglow*,  
Nor *how the roving wind* could bring across the Overland  
A *sound of voices silent* now and *songs of long ago*.  
  
But some that heard the whisper clear were filled with vague unrest;  
The breeze had brought its message home, they could not fixed abide;  
Their fancies wandered all the day towards the blue hills' breast,  
Towards the sunny slopes that lie along the riverside.  
The mighty rolling western plains are very fair to see,  
Where waving to the passing breeze the silver myalls stand,  
But fairer are the giant hills, all rugged though they be,  
From which the two great rivers rise that run along the Bland.  
  
Oh, rocky range, and rugged spur, and river running clear  
That swings around the sudden bends with swirl of snow-white foam,  
Though we, your sons, are far away, we sometimes seem to hear  
The message that the breezes bring to call the wanderers home.  
The mountain peaks are white with snow that feeds a thousand rills,  
Along the river-banks the maize grows tall on virgin land,  
And we shall live to see once more those sunny southern hills,  
And strike once more the bridle-track that leads along the Bland.

6

**In Retrospect**

In 1939, 45 years after the bush controversy in the Bulletin Debate, Paterson recalls his thoughts in an interview.

‘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 realized 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.

"We ought to do pretty well out of it," he said. "We ought to be able to get in three or four sets of verses before they stop us."

This suited me all right, for we were working on space, and the pay was very small ... so we slam-banged away at each other for weeks and weeks; not until they stopped us, but until we ran out of material …’

 For more see <http://www.uq.edu.au/~mlwham/banjo/bush_controversy.html>

**The Land: Belonging**

In 1895 Paterson wrote the most well-known poem in Australia, ***Waltzing Matilda***. The poem presents a naïve and romantic view of freedom for the wandering ‘swagman’ (itinerant worker/tramp). He faces adventure and also a little bad luck with the authorities by stealing a sheep from a squatter (farmer). The poem alludes to the ideal of freedom from organised society in the cities where poverty and destitution were the prospects for many people who migrated there. The swagman prefers to drown himself rather than give himself up to the authorities and be incarcerated. This short poem became so popular that it was chosen to be played at National and International ceremonies even though ‘God save our Queen’ was the official National Anthem until 1984 when it was replaced by ‘Advance Australia Fair’ by Peter Dodds McCormick who was Scottish born.

**Waltzing Matilda** B. Paterson *1895*

OH! there once was a swagman camped in the Billabong,   
Under the shade of a Coolabah tree;   
And he sang as he looked at his old billy boiling,   
“Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”   
  
Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda, my darling,   
Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?   
Waltzing Matilda and leading a water-bag   
Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?

Down came a jumbuck to drink at the water-hole,   
Up jumped the swagman and grabbed him in glee;   
And he sang as he put him away in his tucker-bag,   
“You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me!”   
  
Down came the Squatter a-riding his thorough-bred;   
Down came Policemen, one, two, and three.   
”Whose is the jumbuck you’ve got in the tucker-bag?   
You’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”   
  
But the swagman, he up and he jumped in the water-hole,   
Drowning himself by the Coolabah tree;   
And his ghost may be heard as it sings in the Billabong,   
“Who’ll come a-waltzing Matilda with me.”

7

**The Land: Alienating**

As towns became more populated, factories grew and suburban life became the norm, twentieth century poetry about the Australian landscape became less epic and more a reflection of one’s displacement, alienation or difficulty in identifying with the land or surroundings. Poems written the early 1900s, during and after WW1, provide a bleaker, more introspective view of the individual’s place in nature and society. Nowhere is this more evident than in A.D. Hope’s poem *Australia.*

###### Australia A. D. Hope *London Spectator, 1908*

###### A nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey In the field uniform of modern wars Darkens her hills, those endless, outstretched paws Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.

###### They call her a young country, but they lie: She is the last of lands, the emptiest, A woman beyond her change of life, a breast Still tender but within the womb is dry.

###### Without songs, architecture, history: The emotions and superstitions of younger lands, Her rivers of water drown among inland sands, The river of her immense stupidity

###### Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth. In them at last the ultimate men arrive Whose boast is not: 'we live' but 'we survive', A type who will inhabit the dying earth.

###### And her five cities, like five teeming sores, Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state Where second-hand Europeans pullulate Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

###### Yet there are some like me turn gladly home From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find The Arabian desert of the human mind, Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,

###### Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes Which is called civilization over there.

8

**The Land: A place to call Home**

Other poets instead write from a more nostalgic point of view, providing a sense of duality of the landscape that lives within the inhabitants of that land. Marion Mackellar wrote the following poem while she was ill during her stay in London. A veritable exposition of how much she missed her home but most importantly the landscape.

**My Country**Isobel Marion Dorothea Mackellar *London Spectator, 1908*

The love of field and coppice  Core of my heart, my country!   
Of green and shaded lanes,  Land of the rainbow gold,   
Of ordered woods and gardens  For flood and fire and famine   
Is running in your veins.  She pays us back threefold.   
Strong love of grey-blue distance,  Over the thirsty paddocks,   
Brown streams and soft, dim skies  Watch, after many days,   
I know, but cannot share it,  The filmy veil of greenness    
My love is otherwise.  That thickens as we gaze ...   
  
I love a sunburnt country,  An opal-hearted country,   
A land of sweeping plains,  A wilful, lavish land   
Of ragged mountain ranges,  All you who have not loved her,   
Of droughts and flooding rains. You will not understand     
I love her far horizons,  though Earth holds many splendours,    
I love her jewel-sea,  Wherever I may die,   
Her beauty and her terror  I know to what brown country   
The wide brown land for me!  My homing thoughts will fly.   
  
The stark white ring-barked forests,   
All tragic to the moon,   
The sapphire-misted mountains,   
The hot gold hush of noon,   
Green tangle of the brushes   
Where lithe lianas coil,   
And orchids deck the tree-tops,   
And ferns the warm dark soil.   
  
Core of my heart, my country!   
Her pitiless blue sky,   
When, sick at heart, around us   
We see the cattle die   
But then the grey clouds gather,   
And we can bless again   
The drumming of an army,   
The steady soaking rain.

9

**Conclusion: Creation of an Identity**

It is not clear when exactly the creation of the image of the ‘Bushman’, ‘Swagman’ (itinerant worker/tramp) or ‘Bushranger’ (outlaw) came about, but many Australians still identify with this ‘persona’ today, or at least they believe this ‘ideal’ exists somewhere in the pure, rugged outback. It provides a stereotype that helped create the Australian male character with strong values of mate-ship, hard work and the view of giving a ‘bloke’ a second chance at redemption. This ideal has been personified in poems and ballads such as *The Man from Snowy River*, in popular novels such as *For the term of his Natural Life*, *The Shiralee,* and *The Thorn Birds.* This ideal has also been subject in the media. Modern interpretations have been seen in films such as *Crocodile Dundee* and in the character played by Hugh Jackman in the Australian Government funded film *Australia.* Interestingly, when we consider the modern Australian female in this scenario, it is easy to assume that the qualities valued are similar to those of the male; hard-working, loyal, determined with a no fuss attitude.

**Questions:**

How much does a country’s landscape influence its poetic tradition?

How does that poetic tradition shape the identity of an individual or group of people today?

**Bibliography**

C. Wallace Crabbe, The Golden Apples of the Sun; Twentieth Century Australian Poetry. MUP, 1980

P. Pierce, The Cambridge History of Australian Literature. CUP, 2009

**Homework**

* Think of a poem that YOU can identify with (it must relate to the landscape or nature in general).
* Write out the poem and below it give a **personal comment** (300 words) describing how this poem has influenced the way you see yourself (your identity).
* If your poem is in original language, you must find an English rendition of it. Include in your comment what you think of the translation into English.
* Upload your work on the following link:

<http://www.compilatio.net/folder/jkrtz>