

review

Leaving Home with Henry

Phillip Edmonds

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More often than not, literary criticism seems busy telling the past what it was really like. Novels, at least historical ones, do the same thing. But, refreshingly, Phillip Edmonds' novella *Leaving Home with Henry* turns this process upside down by having Henry Lawson, one of Australia's great writers, come to life on a road trip with Trevor, a contemporary writer who has "a wider mission into where mateship might be" (10). As the two writers drive across the continent, they talk about what they see of the new Bushlife and the types of characters they meet on the way.

Like Trevor, who sees his trip as "only skirting the country for to be totally prepared would only be to conquer, summarise, understand it, when why shouldn't it remain a mystery?" (10), Edmonds' novella offers a series of glimpses into events that echo the impressionistic sketches Lawson offers in his own stories without omniscient judgments and evaluations. To have written a long novel about Lawson would be incommensurate with the ways Lawson

thought and wrote. The eighty pages of the text of *Leaving Home with Henry* are comprised of sixteen episodic chapters with only one chapter exceeding four pages in length.

What this means for readers not familiar with Lawson is that they are given a feel for what a Lawson story or sketch is like. This seems fitting, given the ways Trevor thinks of Lawson as one of his inspirations from his school days: “Our stories for once and not another off-colour English imitation” (12). The two stories Trevor remembers reading at school seem to offer the reader familiar with Lawson’s work a key to what Edmonds is doing. “The Drover’s Wife” and “The Union Buries Its Dead” offer two sides of Lawson; the one a vision of the bleak loneliness of an isolated woman, the other a near-farcical dark comedy of a strangers’ funeral in Bourke where the community who attend the procession fall away as they get more drunk. Trevor sees Henry Lawson’s life in terms of the wide variations in his view of the world: “swinging on a fulcrum of promise and desperation” (12).

The question silently suggested by the way Edmonds sets up the scene is whether Trevor is a modern day Henry Lawson. If we see their relationship this way, we may explain the small amount of recorded direct speech the two characters share on their trip; they see things in very much the same way, so there is no real need for them to explain themselves to each other. After Trevor has visited the National Library in Canberra to read Lawson’s letters, he drives out of Yass and finds Henry sitting in his car reciting bits of poems. There is no discussion of whether Trevor is mad or just fantasizing about his companion; perhaps this is a version of magic realism? That is left up to the reader to decide if he or she wants to go down that track.

As they drive around the country, we start to notice that no one recognizes the National Icon; he’s just another bloke to them. The

characters or larrikins they meet are not all that different to the ones Lawson had met in the 1890s on his travels through the same parts of the country. But there is a difference in the ways things were written about then compared to the ways we want our fiction now. Trevor complains to Henry:

Nowadays people want to be distracted and you write about the country like a larrikin forensic scientist, telling jokes about people they can't feel superior to. I know you didn't like the bush, but you wrote about it. People now want to live in cities with at least two cars, four bedrooms, a spa, and not be weak enough to ask for help from a trade union, that kind of thing. Today stories are about the problems of love and the pace of change, and very little else, I suspect. (24-25)

There seems to be a lot on Trevor's liver that he needs to get off. He calls Henry "feral" and seems to blame him when he explains, "If it wasn't for a few people like me, you'd have been forgotten years ago" (28). This isn't exactly the small talk we have been led to expect by the title of the chapter or sketch this diatribe appears in. Is Trevor's outburst a result of his own delusional fantasy; a product of his coming to terms with his own literary function; or is it an expression of what Lawson himself seems to represent: the larrikin disregard for authority and convention mixed with an egalitarian spirit of mateship where people can say what's really on their minds. Or is this just an example of the Tall Poppy Syndrome whereby Australians seem to delight in pulling anyone down who has achieved any success? Henry's response maintains his equanimity and defuses the situation:

Henry was taken aback, but he saw the humour in Trevor's broad brush and admired the man for getting rid of the bullshit...He saw why Trevor was audacious about the big picture, because the little pictures disappointed him. (29)

Another response from Henry could have been to quote himself from “Two Larrikins” when Stowsher asks, “But wot’s all this got to do with it?” Henry is magnanimous in his keeping of his response to himself; he doesn’t have to prove anything to Trevor, and he knows it. Or perhaps Trevor’s fantasy, if that is what it is, doesn’t work that way; he knows how Henry would have responded anyway. Trevor seems to need to get these ideas out of his system as he learns to see things in a different way on his road trip which will eventually lead to his letting go of Henry.

By this point in the novella, we are wondering whether Henry will ever be able to find stories to tell in the Bush as it now is. But by the time they make it into Nimbin on the north coast of New South Wales, things start to change. Henry has a sexual encounter with a modern woman and disappears for a while. When Trevor reports him missing, the police officer quips:

Mate, I’ve seen pretty well everything in this job, but never before have I been asked to go looking for a national icon, except when we have to shoot them if their numbers get out of control.

We can recognize in this comment the sardonic or at least laconic spirit of the people we find in Lawson’s stories. But this is now Trevor’s story; he is experiencing his own version of Australia as it comes into contact with its past and he is learning from it. It is also Edmonds reveling in his own element.

In Surfer’s Paradise, Trevor meets Kirsty, “a healthy brunette from the US” (73) who asks him what the Australian Dream is. His response is interesting as it marks a break from his attempts to think like Henry:

He felt like one of those Thai dogs he'd seen in Bangkok, who people say are Buddhists, inscrutable animals who watch the world go by in all its absurdity and joy. (73)

This comes out of the blue until we remember that Trevor's original impetus for his road trip was that he had "just returned from India and wanted to go to a place where there weren't as many people" (9). He has had his own experiences on roads outside Australia, unlike Henry who never left the country. Trevor is starting to use this experience to think with as he finds his own voice.

Later, Trevor and Henry go to a nightclub on Chevron Island in Queensland where they encounter a Pauline Hansenesque woman. She is being courted by "greying middle-aged men" although she seems the type of person Trevor's friends would call a "slapper", Edmonds the writer intervenes to give her a name that he makes up: "We'll call her Cheryl, for the sake of the story" (77). Cheryl's lunatic fringe ideas about Asians, AIDS, African's terrorists and all the other phobias that infest a certain segment of the population's psyches, wins her a crowd of admirers in this den of mediocrity:

She had been admired, people said, because she didn't care what people thought of her. She was a racist larrikin given licence in a country that couldn't even cope with the likes of Henry. Others said that powerful politicians let her go because they were frightened of the big Australian Dream which might be unearthed if the real story of mateship is ever told. (78)

Just before Henry gets on a bus to travel to Sydney alone, he tells Trevor of his impressions of the people he has seen on Stradbroke Island, but may just as well be describing all those he has encountered so far:

They are people more often than not frightened of themselves, and because of that, of ideas, but they can be kind and full of joy. (86)

When in Sydney, Henry goes to a Writers Conference and hears an expert pontificating on the works of Henry Lawson “without the sense to acknowledge how people construct stories for their own reasons during different times” (88). Henry feels that he must correct this academic view and so responds:

I’ve learnt from a recent trip around the country that we must try to look outward and inward at the same time. The story isn’t about you or me. It’s bigger than that kind of little canvas. (88)

Henry has the last word in the novella, though we feel that he is ventriloquizing Edmonds’ view, when he reflects to himself that “the story of this land, if given half a chance, can still be strong enough to sweep away the puffed up and the powerful.” (89)

What Edmonds’ novella gives us are instances of how the voices of those we meet need to be heard and engaged with; not to fit them into our own small world, but to recognize that we are just partners in their telling of their stories. This is mateship and the egalitarian spirit that Lawson recognized and still epitomizes to those who are willing to listen to him with open ears.

For those who are unfamiliar with the Australian story, as much as for literary people or those Australians who don’t know of Lawson except his image on a postage stamp, Edmonds’ novella offers an invaluable insight into how we talk with and about each other. This is Lawson’s great achievement that seems to inspire Edmonds. Edmonds also offers a way of keeping alive the great writers’ voices by engaging with them in open and frank discussions about what we mean as people. We have much to learn from Lawson and

Edmonds, not only about Australia and its literature, but about ourselves in relation to others we meet on our literary or geographical travels. The wit and humour evinced by Edmonds in his work encourages us not to take ourselves too seriously and to give voice to the larrikin that may still live in us if only we know where to look for him or her.

References

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