

Henry Lawson's Irish Characters

This entry was posted on June 6, 2017 by huntrogers, in biography, Commemoration, Features, Henry Lawson, historical commemoration, History, Of Literary Interest, Tinteán Editorial Team and tagged Australian literature, Henry Lawson, Irish English, Irish language, Irish stereotype, The brogue. Bookmark the permalink.

Henry Lawson Sesquicentenary of Birth June 17, 1867



On September 9, 1937, the *Adelaide Chronicle* posted a tribute to Henry Lawson, claiming that 'more than any other writer, he represented essentially the Australian spirit'. This reputation has survived up until now, one hundred and fifty years after his birth, even though Lawson's literary works are hardly known in Australia outside of academia, and even there, Australian literature is no longer as popular as it once was.

The perennial appeal of Lawson's stories lies in the universality of personalities such as Mitchell, The Oracle and Stiffener. These are literary types who appeal to the better part of our nature, our compassion for the struggle of small people against the vagaries of life and our delight in the ordinary made extraordinary. We also know them as battlers.

Like many other writers of his time, Lawson used Irish characters in his multicultural cast as a literary device, in the main a comic one. To what extent Lawson's Irish characters were like real life Irish people living in Australia at the time of his writings is difficult to say. What can be examined is to what extent Lawson managed to avoid stereotyping the Irish in his prose works, while at the same time supplying enough linguistic clues to alert the reader as to the character's nationality. Of interest, too, is the nature of the role played by Irish characters in Lawson's works.

Literary Types

Annelise Truninger has undertaken a study of the depiction of the stage Irishman in drama from Shakespeare to O'Casey. She identifies two major Irish types, the brash soldier and the cunning servant. Irish stage characters up until 1800 were generally of a low social order, exhibiting 'blunders' in speech and action and with a marked verbosity. Declan Kiberd has also analysed the stereotypical 'Paddy' of stage and literature, whom he says, is 'charming or threatening by turns', rebellious and emotional



cunning servant

Lawson's Irish types range from 'Ryan' the horse-breeder, to unnamed shanty-keepers, shearers, swagmen, a schoolmaster, troopers and constables, through to the character 'O'Hara', a Justice of the Peace. The Irish played a range of roles in nineteenth century Australia, from the unskilled and uneducated manual worker to the educated and trained administrators and professionals.

Lawson's first teacher was a 'John Tierney'. His wife's mother, Mrs Bertha McNamara, ran a bookshop in Castlereagh Street, Sydney, frequented by many Labor/Irish politicians. He was seriously interested in Ireland's political struggles: his first published poem, '*A Song of the Republic*', appeared in the *Bulletin* on October 1, 1897.

The habits and characteristics of Lawson's literary Irish, however, lean more towards stage Irishry. All too often the Irish are depicted as being drunkards and stupid. For example, in the sketch '*Down Another Hole*', Lawson portrays the character Larry Church as stupefied with drink, a condition which leads him to mistake a chimney nook for a mine shaft. There follows a comic bit of writing on Church's efforts to extricate himself from what he thinks is a perilous situation:

'Phwat sort o' crimson sundowner's shaft is it? Feels like they've shlabbed it wid bark, begod...but here goes! If it was the devil's own sharrft I'd get out of it'.

Another character, Mother Mac in the story '*The Exciseman*' is a shanty owner, a 'stoutly aggressive woman' with unsavoury habits. Her reaction to the suggestion that she might be selling liquor illegally is loudly defensive:

'It's the dirty drink ye're afther, is it? Well I'll tell ye first for last, that we doant keep a little drop of the right stuff nor a little drop of the wrong stuff in this house'.



An Irish character in Australian literature will often be introduced to the reader as such. The introduction may be straightforward, as in *Robbery Under Arms* 'Mother was a Roman Catholic – most Irishwomen are' or E.S. Sorenson's *The Squatter's Ward*, 'The Irishman listened attentively'. In addition the Irish characters will also have Irish names, such as Kate O'Mara, the heroine in Ann Clancy's *The Wild Colonial Girl*.

What is most interesting, however, in Lawson's portrayals of Irish characters is his lack of introduction of them as such. For example, the drunkard Alfred Ward, the subject of the story '*Elder Man's Lane V111*', is not recognisably Irish by his name, and he is not introduced as Irish either. Alfred Ward's nationality is only apparent towards the end of the story when his speech pattern is revealed in a single line –

'After the Father had done with him he 'went up' for a couple of months, 'to git the dhrink out iv him, an' reflect'.

Lawson is aware of the stereotypical aspect to names and teases the reader accordingly – 'From a literary point of view, 'Alf Ward' might seem a good name to tack on to a case of embezzlement or forgery...And then again it mightn't'.

In general, Lawson's Irish characters play a minor role in his stories and sketches. An exception is the sketch *The Old Master*. Although the narrator of the sketch is clearly Irish he is not named as such. In this way, perhaps, Lawson can avoid the comic potential that is always present in the rendition of Irish English dialogue. The sketch begins

'God bless us! it's Joseph. How are ye, lad-how are ye?...Yes, I'm well, thank God, save for a fillum over me oi and a nasty tired feelin' about me sometimes'

The dialect is toned down as the schoolmaster talks about changes:

'I'm trying to get an exchange. I'm thinking of getting a school somewhere down the coast. The change would do me good'.

The schoolmaster's profession and his age, of course, also endow him with a respectability that transcends ethnicity. How he speaks is less important than what he has to say about change, and Lawson is careful in his use of dialect in this sketch. The character of the old schoolmaster may have been based on Lawson's own schoolmaster, an Irishman named John Tierney who it appears had a strong accent as described in 'A Fragment of Autobiography' in *A Camp-Fire Yarn*: 'his strong points were penmanship, arithmetic, geography and the brogue'.

Of course, Lawson at other times happily exploits the stereotypical emotional and comic nature attributed to the Irish. The title of the short story 'A Wild Irishman' in *A Camp-Fire Yarn* affords the reader an instant insight into the nature of its major character. The story is of an emotional, heavy drinking Irishman known as 'The Flour'. His story is related by another Irishman, an old digger mate of Lawson's. The author can give free reign to generalisations of Irish types through the voice of his narrator –

'There's the little red Irishman...who always wants to fight when he has a glass in him...and there's the big sarcastic dark Irishman...and there's the cheerful easy-going Irishman...the Flour was a combination off all three...'

This description is borne out by the ensuing black comedic story of the fighting and drinking wild Irishman. Another comedic character of Lawson's is Pat O'Brien, the subject of a practical joke in '*A Long Way to Cork*'. In this story the aptly named Pat O'Brien is duped by his fellow travellers into thinking he has been bitten by a snake.

Irish English Dialect Patterns

Whether Lawson's Irish characters have typical Irish names or are introduced as such, they are instantly recognisable as Irish by anyone familiar with the common features of Irish English in writing. Irish English dialect is noted for its use of arcane English words and pronunciations as well as elements from the Irish language. In the short story 'James and Maggie' the character Ryan recounts how he was asked to come in for 'a cup o' tay' by Mrs Murphy. Hundred years ago the correct English sound of the diphthong *ea* was the same as long *a* in *fate* according to PW Joyce in his *English as we speak it in Ireland* (1910). This practice was eventually abandoned in England, but Ireland's geographical isolation meant that the practice continued there. Joyce, writing in 1910 finds the practice 'everywhere in Ireland.'

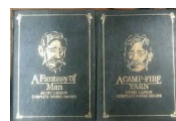
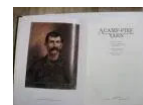
A Fantasy of Man (1901-1922)

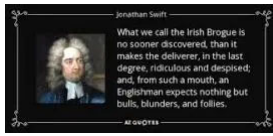
Larry Church, the focus of the sketch 'Down Another Hole' in *A Fantasy of Man* is not identified as Irish. The reader, however, may guess at his origins, because the story opens when as Larry is coming home from Mass. Larry's origins are clear, however, when we hear him speak - 'Phwat sort of timberin' is this?' Here the use of Irish broad *f*-sound (a bilabial fricative) for the English *wh* – represents the sound the Irish people found to be closest to English *wh* – the letter *w* not being in the IG alphabet. We can see this influence also in Irish surnames, for example *Faoláin* and *Faóite*, which are translated into English as 'Whelan' and 'White', respectively.

Another Irish language feature in Larry's speech is the word *slabbed* written as *shlabbed* - 'feels as if they've shlabbed it wid barrk, begod'. This is a common feature of Irish English where, following the pronunciation rules of the Irish language, 's' is pronounced 'sh' in consonant clusters involving 's', so that 'story' is pronounced 'shstory' and 'small' 'schmall'. Mrs Mac, in '*The Exciseman*' is another exponent of this feature when she pronounces *spill* as *shpill* – 'shpill them in the first creek you come to.' Also, in the story '*A Wild Irishman*', the character 'The Flour' says 'I don't believe in their little shwindles. It ought to be shtopped. Leadin' young people ashtroy.'

Divil a thing and God be good to us

The Irish are noted for including religious benedictions and salutations in their speech. Again, this habit has been influenced by its prevalence in the Irish language. For example there is no equivalent for the English word *hello* in the Irish language. An equivalent in meaning to the word *hello* is the phrase *Dia dhuit* 'God be with you', to which the reply is *Dia's Mairé dhuit* 'God and Mary be with you'. Lawson's drunken woman character in '*Elder Man's Lane*' in *A Fantasy of Man* is effusive in her use of Irish benedictions – 'God be good to brothers-in-law...God bless'em...God be good to him...God be good to us all!...God be good to ye! The word *Devil* is used as an intensive in Irish English, which parallels its use in the Irish language where it is used as a 'syntactic device to indicate a negative'. We can see this in operation in Lawson's phrase 'Divil a thing', meaning 'nothing', and 'the Devil he is!' meaning 'he is certainly not'.





The Brogue: bulls, blunders, and follies

The pronunciation of the word *film* as 'fillum' is supposedly a feature of New South Wales English. It is certainly a feature of Irish English, and it is likely, therefore, that the Irish in New South Wales influenced the speech pattern in this instance. The feature can be seen in, say, the Irish word *gorm* 'blue' which is pronounced 'gorrum', and *feirm* 'farm' which is pronounced 'farrum'. The schoolmaster in Lawson's sketch '*The Old Master*' exhibits this feature 'Yes, I'm well, thank God, save for a fillum over me oi'.

Speakers of Irish English from the southwest of Ireland tend to make homophones of words such as *pen* and *pin*, pronouncing both as 'pin'. Lawson makes use of a feature where short e and short i are pronounced similarly, such as *yit* for *yet*, *I'm bit* for *I'm bet*, *fincin' wire* for *fencing wire* and *whinever* for *whenever*. Other Irish English features used by Lawson include the dental pronunciation for 't' and 'd' – 'What are ye dhrrivin' at', 'Ye'll be on th' thrack agin'. Irish English also has a tendency towards the rhotic speech pattern where the 'r' is pronounced strongly. Lawson provides *barrk*, for *bark*, *dirrty* for *dirty*, *sharrft* for *shaft*, *harrd* for *hard*.

Something just happened



The 'brogue' today

Lawson avoids one of the most common features of Irish English speech, the use of *after* plus the gerund to denote something that has just happened (e.g. 'I'm after having my dinner', meaning 'I have just had my dinner'). Similarly he is sparing of the use of the recurrent *and* which is often used by writers for its poetic effect. This would seem to be a conscious decision to avoid the danger of stage Irishisms. Lawson's Irish characters, as mentioned before, are not often introduced as such. At the same time the speech patterns are unmistakably Irish. He is keen to represent the variety of Irish English and not just the instantly recognisable features. He shares this with his readers in his story '*A Wild Irishman*' where he prefaces the tale with 'I make no attempt to give any one shade of the Irish brogue – it can't be done in writing'. Of course Lawson would also have had firsthand experience of a range of 'brogues' from his Catholic schooldays where the majority of teachers would have been Irish-born. In addition, his autobiographical account of growing up in New South Wales is peppered with Irish names, Father O'Donovan, Mrs Kelly, Dave Regan, John Tierney, Cornelius Lyons, a neighbour named Page and Pat the coach driver.

What Lawson succeeds in doing with his Irish characters is assimilating them into his world of travellers, shanty keepers, shearers, policemen, poor city folk and staunch bush folk. At times he is up front with the nature of his Irish characters, evidenced by their names or the title of his story or sketch. Some he imbues with more Irish English dialect features than others, for example Mrs Mac the shanty-keeper and the old schoolmaster. Their voices are arresting divergences from his prose narratives. Other Irish characters have their race origins buried beneath the universality of the frailty of the human condition unable to rise above an addiction such as alcoholism. Lawson's Irish English speaking characters are not the Other of a 'normal' English speech world. They represent the social and linguistic mix that was nineteenth century Australia. Their role in his stories and sketches is to play some of the many vocal parts in this dramatic world of philosophers, practical jokers, schemers and dreamers, winners and losers.

Dymphna Lonergan is an editor at *Tinteán* and a lecturer in Humanities, the Arts, and Social Sciences at Flinders University

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#) WPExplorer.