

Flour, tea, sugar and sometimes grog. Food in the stories of Henry Lawson. 2024

Henry Lawson is arguably the pre-eminent male chronicler through his short stories of outback domestic life and the life of a swagman and a shearer in Australia in the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th. Several of them mention food. What picture do we get from Lawson's stories of food in these settings?

This article explores this drawing on collections of Lawson's stories published during his time *While the Billy Boils* (1896),¹ *Joe Wilson and His Mates* (1901),² *Children of the Bush* (1902)³ and a selection from these and other stories by Colin Roderick for *The Bush Undertaker* (1974)⁴.

A note about referencing: As most of the citations are to one or other of Lawson's stories after the first instance of the citation I drop the authorship and use only the name of the story.

The outback kitchen

The composite picture of the kitchen from Lawson is of a very spare space – clay floor, clay-walled fireplace with tin chimney, a blackened pole from end to end across the fireplace from which to hang pots and billies.⁵ (Seemingly everyone was often chopping wood to feed the voracious flames.) A single table with rudimentary seats served for prepping food to be cooked and for meals. Biscuit-tins holding groceries sat on a newspaper-lined shelf. Empty tins – jam, mustard, sardines, kerosene, were repurposed as tableware – salt cellars, sugar-bowls, tea caddies - polished till brightly shining by the houseproud and/or lonely bushwoman.⁶ Tin plates and pannikins were for everyday use. In one home 'there were two or three cups without saucers, and a crockery plate or two – also two mugs, cracked and without handles, on with "For A good Boy" and the other with "For A Good Girl" on it, but all these were kept on the mantelshelf for ornament and for company.'⁷

Meat, meat and more meat

You'd be hard pressed to find any vegetable in all the stories apart from potatoes, pumpkin and the odd cabbage. What there was was meat.

The eponymous Drover's Wife occasionally got some freshly killed sheep from her brother-in-law in return for sharing some provisions she had, perhaps tinned food like salmon.⁸ Mary Wilson's neighbour sent across to her 'a piece of beef that looked as if it had been cut off with a wood-axe, but it was fresh and clean'.⁹ Refusing to be paid for it, the boy who brought it over explained: 'We only gets halves in a steer with someone, or sells steers to the butcher – or maybe some meat to a party of fencers or surveyors, or tank-sinkers, or them sorter people. What won't keep we salts down in the cask.'¹⁰ Salted meat was a staple for swagmen, shearers travelling from one job to another, or

¹ Lawson, Henry, *While The Billy Boils*, Angus Robertson 1896

² Lawson, Henry, *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, 1902

³ Lawson, Henry, *Children of the Bush* 1902 accessed at gutenberg.net.au

⁴ Lawson, Henry, *The Bush Undertaker and Other Stories*, Colin Roderick 1974 p.168

⁵ A billy is the universal pot of varying sizes for boiling water for tea and coffee and for cooking stews or pumps of meat on the track. Having construed colonial Australia as tea-drinking I was surprised by how much coffee was drunk, at least in Lawson's stories.

⁶ Food canning had been established in the colonies since the 1840s

⁷ 'Water Them Geraniums', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.178

⁸ 'The Drover's Wife', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.20

⁹ 'Water Them Geraniums', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.175

¹⁰ 'Water Them Geraniums', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.175

other journey men. *The Bush Undertaker* had a dinner of salted beef and boggabri¹¹. He liked to keep the beef 'just on the sizzle, as hard bilin' makes it tough'.¹² Others liked corned beef, some boiling it overnight in the coals..¹³ Bacon was a frequent breakfast sometimes paired with eggs.¹⁴ Eggs might also be paired with ham.¹⁵ Mutton broth was made in the billy.¹⁶ Mutton and potatoes were cooked sizzling in the camp oven¹⁷ surrounded by coals in the hearth.¹⁸

Flour, sugar and tea were staples in the home and on the track.¹⁹ The flour and sugar baked into into sponges and tarts and plates of sandwiches were refreshment at dances.²⁰ A cup of tea, cake and some bread and butter was a welcome break when working.²¹

What about fish? *The Bush Undertaker* wished he 'had just enough fat to make the pan siss; I'd treat myself to a leather-jacket; but it took three weeks 'skimmin' to get enough for them there doughboys.²² The creek near where Andy and Dave were mining in *The Loaded Dog* had plenty of fish in it – 'fresh-water bream, cod, cat-fish and tailers. Andy would fish for three hours at a stretch if encouraged by a "nibble" or a "bite" every now and then – say once in twenty minutes.'²³

There was a single reference to eating rabbit.²⁴

Some homes had grapevines trailing on their terrace or in a vineyard sometimes as much as an acre,²⁵ but no-one was noted as making wine. Some had successful orchards but what fruit was grown is not described.²⁶

Apart from the boggabri and the fish there is only one other reference to native foods, eating salt kangaroo at Christmas in the absence of kangaroos to be hunted at that time.²⁷

Lawson has a single reference to how goods are brought from the city to outback areas, and that is by coach,²⁸ but is short on the details here of how the goods got from coach to settler. Perhaps they were offloaded at a shanty or public house like that run by Con O'Donnell which was also a grocery.²⁹ The settler may have made an arrangement with the coach to meet it at some spot.

¹¹ Boggabri is a native amaranth.

¹² 'The Bush Undertaker'. *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.12

¹³ 'Brighten's Sister-In-Law', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.148

¹⁴ 'Brighten's Sister-In-Law', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.155

¹⁵ His Brother's Keeper, *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.262

¹⁶ His Brother's Keeper', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.269

¹⁷ A camp oven is a cast iron round cooking pot with the ability to distribute heat evenly that sits in the coals of a fire and can have coals heaped on top of it as well.

¹⁸ 'No Place For A Woman', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.116

¹⁹ 'Water Them Geraniums', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.166; *Stragglers, While the Billy Boils* p.75;; 'No Place For A Woman', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.115; 'Two Sundowners', *Joe Wilson's Mates*

²⁰ 'Buckholdts' Gate', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.203

²¹ 'Joe Wilson's Courtship', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.8

²² 'The Bush Undertaker'. *The Bush Undertaker* ... pp. 11-12

²³ 'The Loaded Dog'. *The Bush Undertaker* p.99

²⁴ 'Hungerford', *While the Billy Boils*, Angus and Robertson 1991 p.37

²⁵ 'Buckholdts' Gate', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.196

²⁶ 'A Day on a Selection', *While the Billy Boils*, Angus and Robertson 1991 p.56

²⁷ 'The Ghosts of Many Christmases', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.321

²⁸ 'The Exciseman', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.344

²⁹ 'Roll Up At Talbragar', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.310

Christmas

Lawson appears to have been an early opposer of a British Christmas in Australia. The narrator of *That Pretty Girl In The Army* says:

We had dinner at Billy Wood's place, and a sensible Christmas dinner it was – everything cold, except the vegetables, with the hose going on the verandah in spite of the by-laws, and Billy's wife and her sister, fresh and cool-looking, instead of being hot and brown and cross like most Australia women who roast themselves over a blazing fire in a hot kitchen on a broiling day, all the morning to cook scalding plum pudding and red hot roasts, for no other reason than that their grandmothers used to cook hot Christmas dinners in England.³⁰

The narrator of *The Ghosts of Many Christmases* remembers' Christmas dinner under a brush shearing-shed. Mutton and plum pudding – and fifty miles from beer!³¹

On The Tucker Track

The bushwoman was busy putting some tucker in a sugar-bag. "There's tea and sugar and salt in these mustard tins and they won't get wet' she said" and there's some butter too; but I don't know how you'll manage about the bread - I've wrapped it up, but you'll have to keep it dry as well as you can".³²

Swagmen, drivers and shearers when they met would talk about water, and exchange hints as to good tucker-tracks - the places you could expect to get a meal or a handout or both.³³ There was an unwritten rule about this. 'You can depend on getting tucker once at one place; then you must tramp on to the next. If you cannot get it once you must go short; but there is a lot of energy in an empty stomach. If you get an extra supply you may camp for a day and have a spell. To live you must walk. To cease walking is to die.'³⁴

What you could expect as a handout was some the staples and maybe some meat. 'Somewhere along here we saw a swagman's camp – a square of calico stretched across a horizontal stick, some rags streaming on another stick in front of a fire, and two billies to the leeward side of the blaze. We knew by instinct that there was a piece of beef in the large one'.³⁵

Sometimes approaching the cook directly paid off. 'He saw the cook and got some 'brownie', a bit of cooked meat and packet of baking powder'.³⁶ The baking powder would come in useful for bread and buns cooked in the camp oven.³⁷

Meals on the road were simple affairs. It could be a 'hunk of damper and meat (with) a clasp-knife in (my) hands – sitting on my heel in the dust, or on a log or a tucker-box.³⁸ Or a fried chop or a piece of steak if you had been lucky on the tucker track.

³⁰ 'That Pretty Girl In The Army' *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.391

³¹ 'The Ghosts of Many Christmases' *Children In The Bush* gutenberg.net.au

³² 'Wanted By The Police', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.321

³³ 'Stragglers' *While the Billy Boils* p.79

³⁴ 'Stragglers', *While the Billy Boils* p.75

³⁵ 'In A Wet Season', *While the Billy Boils* p.191

³⁶ 'Two Sundowners', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.417

³⁷ 'The House That Was Never Built' *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.225

³⁸ 'The Babies in the Bush', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.137

Not knowing the tucker track you might end up at a house where the bushwoman wouldn't even let you boil your billy in her kitchen as others did.³⁹ Stations where you wouldn't get food were known as 'hungry' stations.⁴⁰

Then there was the Sundowner, a 'swagman loafer, or 'bummer' (who) times himself, especially in bad weather, to arrive at the shed just about sundown; he is then sure of tea, shelter for the night, breakfast, and some tucker from the cook to take him on along the track'.⁴¹ Sundowners weren't above 'cadging', getting something they were not really entitled to.

Brummy and Swampy were not above cadging. They carried a spare set of tucker bags, and if, for instance they were out of sugar and had plenty of flour and tea, Brummy or Swampy would go to the (station) store, boundary rider's hut, or selector's with the sugar bag in his hand and the other bags in his shirt front on spec. He'd get the sugar first, and then, if it looked good enough, the flour bag would come out, then the tea-bag ... And when they'd cadged more tucker than they could comfortably carry, they'd camp for a day or two and eat it down.⁴²

The sly grog shanty

The 'wretched wayside shanty with its drink-madness and blasphemy'⁴³ is often a place visited by Lawson's male protagonists:

We only had two shillings to carry us four or five hundred miles, but it was mighty hot and dusty and we felt that we must have a drink at the shanty.⁴⁴

I was beastly drunk in an out-of-the-way shanty in the bush – a sly grog shop.⁴⁵

It wasn't only the alcohol that was the danger at shanties. Shanty owners like Thomas were, a notorious 'lamber-down' – a shanty-keeper who entices cheque men to drink.⁴⁶ 'Flash barmaids', it was said, were sometimes 'engaged by the publican up-country as baits for chequemen.'⁴⁷ Chequemen were shearers or other rural workers who got paid by cheque. When spending their money they were said to be 'blueing it'.

Mrs or Mother Mac engaged in subterfuge to put off police and others.

Mrs or Mother Mac sold refreshments, from a single rough bush dinner at eighteen pence a head to passengers, to a flyblown bottle of ginger-ale or lemonade, hot in the weather from a sunny fly-specked window. In between there was cold corned beef, bread and butter, and tea, and (best of all if they only knew it) a good bush billy of coffee on the coals before the fire on cold wet nights. And outside of it all, there was cold tea, which, when confidence was established, or they knew one of the party, she served hushedley in cups without saucers; for which she sometimes apologised, and which she took into her murderous bedroom to fill and replenish in its darkest and most felonious corner from homicidal-looking pots, by candlelight.

³⁹ 'Getting' Back On Dave Reagan', *The Bush Undertaker* ... p.105

⁴⁰ 'Two Sundowners', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.416

⁴¹ 'Two Sundowners', *Joe Wilson's Mates* 1970 p.413

⁴² 'Two Sundowners', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.413

⁴³ 'His Brother's Keeper', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.256

⁴⁴ 'Poisonous Jimmy Gets Left', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.113

⁴⁵ 'The Babies in the Bush', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.147

⁴⁶ 'His Brother's Keeper', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.262

⁴⁷ 'Telling Mrs. Baker', *Joe Wilson's Mates* p.161

Lawson was an alcoholic, and several of his protagonists are also, like Bob Baker who was ‘a boss drover on the great north-western route’. Often their wives ask their mates to lookout for them when travelling together. ‘Look here, Andy, I am afraid Robert is drinking again. Now I want you to look after him for me, as much as you can – you seem to have as much influence with him as anyone. I want you to promise me that you’ll never have a drink with him’.⁴⁸ Usually, as in this story, this fails.

The romance of the swag

To end this article, I thought we could have a look at the contents of a swag:

Leaky billy-can, containing fishingline, papers, suet, needles and cotton, etc. Jam-tin, medicine bottles, corks on strings, to hang to his hat to keep the flies off (a sign of madness in the bush, for the corks would madden a sane man sooner than the flies could). Three boots of different sizes, all belonging to the right foot, and a left slipper. Coffeepot, without handle or spout, and quart-pot full of rubbish—broken knives and forks, with the handles burnt off, spoons, etc., picked up on rubbish-heaps; and many rusty nails, to be used as buttons, I suppose.

Broken saw blade, hammer, broken crockery, old pannikins, small rusty frying-pan without a handle, children’s old shoes, many bits of old bootleather and greenhide, part of yellowback novel, mutilated English dictionary, grammar and arithmetic book, a ready reckoner, a cookery book ...⁴⁹

To the top strap fasten the string of the nose-bag, a calico bag about the size of a pillow-slip, containing the tea, sugar, and flour bags, bread, meat, baking powder and salt.⁵⁰

I particularly like the swaggie carrying around a cookery book.

⁴⁸ ‘Telling Mrs. Baker’, *Joe Wilson’s Mates* p.161

⁴⁹ ‘The Romance of The Swag’, *Joe Wilson’s Mates* p.191

⁵⁰ ‘The Romance of the Swag’, *Joe Wilson’s Mates* p.191