

Did Henry Lawson read Nietzsche?

By David Rathbone.

During a recent course of lectures at the National Gallery of Victoria, I examined some of the complicated connections between Norman Lindsay's art and Nietzsche's philosophy, and explored the fascinating and at times frightening histories of Jack Lindsay and Percy "Inky" Stephensen. My thesis throughout the lectures was that the various understandings of Nietzsche displayed by Lionel, Norman and Inky all fell short in one way or another of appreciating what Nietzsche calls his anti-anti-semitism, which he used to deconstruct "the pathological manner in which nationalist nonsense has alienated and continues to alienate the peoples of Europe from each other" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* §256 cf. §251). This however was not the case with Norman's son Jack Lindsay, whose strong background in classical studies enabled him to appreciate Nietzsche's philosophy far better than had his father, his uncle or his undergraduate friend Inky Stephensen, but also caused him consequently to shrink away from their racist misunderstandings. This recoil unfortunately went too far; so far in fact that Jack lost faith in his own important book *Dionysus: Nietzsche Contra Nietzsche*, and disowned it.

This put the Lindsay school in a strange position, for it had imported into Australia a philosophy which it itself did not fully understand. What Lionel and Norman had understood immediately was Nietzsche's attempt to liberate the body from the prison of the soul-superstition. Norman's frolicking nudes dance beyond good and evil in perfect innocence, blissfully unaware of the outrage they cause amongst the prudes and puritans of the pulpit and the lectern, animated by a spirit able to forget the bad dreams that were once called "soul" and "God." But the Lindsay brothers also understood that Nietzsche was no materialist, for like Spinoza he denied the old "soul superstition" and the myth of "life after death" only to liberate a spirit which is also the body, and a body which is "deeper than we can dream." Just as our simian ancestors could hardly imagine what possibilities would unfold out of their rudimentary vocal chords, we too stammer and speculate in ignorance and incomprehension when we try to speak of higher capacities which we humans have in a rudimentary form. This stammering rudimentary attempt is called by us "art," and its higher symbolic function at the core of culture cleared by Nietzsche was embraced enthusiastically by both Lionel and Norman.

But what the Lindsay brothers didn't understand was that a parallel liberation is also effected by Nietzsche's philosophy, not only of the body from the constraints of Victorian prudery and religious superstition, but also one of the mind from such constraints as racism and nationalism, overcoming these masks of nihilism in a "new nobility" characterized by its relation to the future, rather than the past. This inadequate understanding of Nietzsche due to their limited reading of his works led the elder Lindsays inadvertently to mar not only their own work, but also to misleadingly taint the name of Nietzsche in Australia with racism. Even the Magic Pudding of today excises an antisemitic line from the first edition. This issue suddenly broke between 1936 and 1938 - Norman and Jack quarreled and fell out, and Jack turned away from Nietzsche (and at a deeper level, from his father) to Marx, and became a communist. Inky, who had returned to Australia, turned abruptly from the left-wing Republicanism of the *Foundations of Culture in Australia* of 1936 (in which he calls Hitler "intrinsically lacking in culture, mentally equipped like a school bully" p.25), to the open support for Hitler printed by *The Publicist* on the 1st June 1938 - a position which not surprisingly landed Inky Stephensen in the Tatura Detention Camp for the duration of WWII. Craig Munro's *Wild Man of Letters* is a brilliant piece of intellectual biography which gets as close to the bottom of the murky affair of Inky Stephensen and the Australia First Party as anyone is ever likely to.

The various racist taints surrounding Norman Lindsay and especially P.R. Stephensen unfortunately meant not only that Jack Lindsay's *Dionysus: Nietzsche Contra Nietzsche* went largely ignored, but that

the work was needlessly repudiated by its own author. An already obscure work (published in a limited edition of 500 copies by the Fanfrolico Press in 1928, never since re-published), Jack showed his disapproval of Norman by throwing out the baby of his own book with the bathwater of his quarrel with Norman. Together with the poetry in *The London Aphrodite* (published in six installments by the Fanfrolico Press in London 1928-29), Jack Lindsay articulates a fascinating interpretation of Nietzsche, free from the lamentable racism and sexist homophobia marring the otherwise brilliant works of his father Norman and his Uncle Lionel, sidestepping altogether their quarrel over Norman's spiritualism and fondness for *séances*, and subsuming the achievements of Christopher Brennan in symbolism, of Hugh McCrae in vitalism, and of Henry Lawson in existential justice and cosmic irony.

Another reason *Dionysus: Nietzsche Contra Nietzsche* is so little known is that after his Marxist turn, Jack Lindsay not only turned away from any further study of Nietzsche, but also chose (disastrously) to re-write all his poetry, so that the contents of his *Collected Poems* of 1981 is a mangled revision of his originally brilliant but eventually ordinary poetry. Although this act of auto-antagonism is wholly consonant with his appreciation of Brennan's point (that "Nietzsche" is the name of a kind of battlefield), it is also difficult not to lament Jack's own attack upon himself, no less than it seems irresistible to lament Brennan's slide into alcoholic self-destruction, or for that matter, Henry Lawson's graceful glide under the foamy waves of an ocean of beer. Interestingly, it is in the writings of Joan Lindsay (wife of Daryl, younger brother of Lionel and Norman) that the challenged posed by these nihilistic implosions is re-interpreted in terms of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return. This theme is both obvious and yet also entirely implicit in Joan Lindsay's work, for Joan Lindsay was no theorist. Yet her enigmatic *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and her autobiographical works *Time Without Clocks* and *Facts Hard and Soft* exemplify an implicit exploration of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return and his perspectival philosophy of masks as lucid and as deep as Simone de Beauvoir's.

Axel Clark's *Christopher Brennan: A Critical Biography* details Brennan's unhappy story meticulously, but Clark's lack of any real understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy places severe restrictions upon his appreciation of Brennan's achievements, which has now been somewhat remedied by Noel Macainsh in his articles on Brennan in *The Pathos of Distance*. Other major Australian poets also reporting that they were influenced by Nietzsche between 1895 and 1910 include Bernard O'Dowd,¹ Hugh McCrae,² Kenneth Slessor.³ But Lawson was a generation older again

Hugh McCrae is right to challenge Judith Wright's anachronism when she makes of both Barcroft Boake and Adam Lindsay Gordon Nietzscheans *avant la lettre* (see Wright *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* pages 63 and 67; Macainsh *Pathos of Distance* p.9). A similar case might be made for Marcus Clarke, whose love of Balzac for instance leads to a certain pre-established harmony with Nietzsche all too easily mistaken for influence, for Nietzsche was also very fond of Balzac (see "Balzac and Modern French Literature" *Australasian* 3 Aug 1867 - reprinted in Wilding (ed) *Portable Marcus*

1 Who writes in "Poetry Militant: An Australian Plea for the Poetry of Purpose" (1909) "I hold two men ... to be the two greatest poets of this age of the Evolution Dawn. Those two poets, Destroyers and Creators, are Walt Whitman and Frederick Nietzsche" (O'Dowd, *Collected Poems* p.28)

2 Who was closely connected with the Lindsay circle from Lionel's illustration of his *Satyrs and Sunlight* onwards, as evident in Fitzgerald (ed) *The Letters of Hugh McCrae* - see eg McCrae to Norman Lindsay ca. 1918 "I need most to tell you that in 'The Hidden Symbol' I find a torch which illuminates the most secret corner of *Creative Effort* ... not that I need any ... but it helps." (*Letters* p.20 - "The Hidden Symbol" being a long essay mostly in dialogue form added as part two to the second (London) edition of *Creative Effort* - Hugh having copies of both manuscripts prior to their publication.

3 Judith Wright said that two conflicting forces meet in Slessor's poetry: "the Nietzschean cry that man must learn to suffice himself, must increase his capacities, must become physically and spiritually superior to himself; and the Nietzschean perception which underlay that demand, that when God is 'dead' nothing can protect man from the malice of the universe." (*Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* p.140)

Clarke). However, a much stronger circumstantial case can be made for an influence on an even more significant figure in Australian literature - Henry Lawson.

Lawson's father, Peter Larsen, was a Norwegian sailor who jumped ship in Melbourne to join the gold-rush in December 1855. Larsen's own father had grown up in the same district in Norway as Ibsen, and as Manning Clark puts it "caught the two strong currents - the Dionysian and the Christian" welling up at that time in Scandinavia (Manning Clark *In Search of Henry Lawson* p.2-3). Lawson's father was a free-thinker, believing not in God but in Man: "the only morality he was interested in was the morality of kindness, of men and women and children being nice to each other" - an attitude consonant with Nietzsche's project of re-valuing Christian values and bringing them "down to earth" - faith, hope, love and charity being thus conceived not as "belief" in other supernatural worlds or creatures or creators, but rather as faith in the creativity of people, as hope that life in *this* world would improve, as love of the actual people actually all around you, not some nebulous "everybody," and as practicing charity not as calculated "point-scoring" with an imaginary deity, but merely as the "overflowing virtue" of the generosity of the over-full spirit. All these virtues are woven throughout the text of both Nietzsche's aphorisms and Lawson's short stories and poems, both of which overflow with an existential authenticity which has arrested readers for generations.

But it is on the side of Lawson's mother that an even stronger possibility of direct Nietzschean influence exists. Lawson's parent's marriage was not a happy one, and in the early 1880s Henry moved with his mother from the bush to Sydney. Louisa Lawson was herself a poet, and her darkly gothic work today remains haunting, if also hacknied. However it is as a proto-feminist that she is mostly remembered, for she founded and edited Australia's first feminist journal called *Dawn*, and the teenage Henry even worked the hand-press for his mother. "The Bulletin Interviews Louisa Lawson" on the Bulletin's Red page of October 24th 1896 is a fascinating interview in which Lawson's mother advances something very much like what Nietzsche says in *Gay Science* §68.

Lawson's later married the daughter of William MacNamara and his German wife. MacNamara was the proprietor of MacNamara's Bookshop at 221 Castlereigh St in Sydney, and gathering-place of the free-thinking intellectuals of the 1890s, the environment in which the 18-21 year-old Henry developed in the early 1890s. Louisa Lawson was part of a literary circle which included Thomas Walker and Alfred Deakin, along with less reputable figures such as "Ragnar Redbeard" (aka Arthur Desmond). Colin Roderick in *The Real Henry Lawson* reports that Henry Lawson "fell into company of a motley band" of poets, philosophers and political activists in the 1890s, including J.A. Andrews and Arthur Desmond, the latter "imbued with what he fancied was the philosophy of Nietzsche. When he met Lawson in 1893, Desmond was engaged upon "improving" on Nietzsche with his megalomaniacal *Might is Right*." (Roderick p. 49). But Lawson knew Desmond was no monster, and later defended him in print directly with his poem "Arthur Desmond," and indirectly with his prose piece "A Leader of the Future."

These circumstantial facts establish the strong likelihood that Nietzsche's name was known to Lawson. There is at least a "Zeitgeist" case to be made. Only further archival research can decide if any direct evidence of Lawson having read Nietzsche can be found. However as the penniless Lawson usually read extensively standing in MacNamara's (and Angus & Robertson's) bookshops to avoid paying for the books, and was not a systematic note-taker, such direct evidence may be difficult to find. In this regard Lawson's partial deafness was an asset, for he could easily concentrate on reading in noisy places. But it also makes it difficult to document Lawson's reading, who could not afford to buy the books he read.

By the time Lionel and Norman Lindsay arrived at the *Bulletin* in 1900, there can be little doubt that Nietzsche's name must have arisen in Lawson's presence. Lionel states rhetorically in his autobiography, "How much we owe to Nietzsche, as artist, as stimulus, as the supreme critic of decadence! No one has suffered more from misinterpretation, yet the world owes to him the destruction of Pessimism as philosophy, and a spiritual return to man as the measure of all things" (*Comedy of Life* p.122). And in 1905 Norman recounts "I got *Zarathustra* in shilling parts translated by Thomas Common, and the exultation I was given by that inspired work transfigured for me all profundities in life and art" (*My Mask* p.124). And there can be even less doubt that Lawson would have read the Red Pages of the *Bulletin* devoted to Nietzsche during 1900 – the Nietzsche obituary on 13th October 1900; "The Ethic of Nietzsche" by *Bulletin* editor A.G. Stephens in the issue of 10th November; and the excerpts of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* entitled "The Wisdom of Nietzsche" in two installments appearing in consecutive issues of the 10th and 17th of November.

John Tregenza reports that Havelock Ellis's essay on Nietzsche's philosophy in *The Savoy* published in London in 1896 is reported by the Lindsays to have made its way to Creswick later that year (Tregenza *Australian Little Magazines 1923-1954: Their Role in Forming and Reflecting Literary Trends* p. 15), and so no doubt that issue was on bookshelves in Sydney shops in the closing years of the 19th century. All of the early secondary literature on Nietzsche discussed in the two works documenting the Nietzsche reception in England between 1890 and 1915 (*Nietzsche in England* by David Thatcher, and *Nietzsche in Anglosaxony* by Patrick Bridgwater) would also have appeared on the shelves of shops in Australia 3 – 6 months later, such as Gorge Brandes' "Essay on Aristocratic Radicalism" of 1889; M.A. Mügge's *Friedrich Nietzsche, his life and work*; H.L. Mencken's *Nietzsche* of 1908; Daniel Halévy's *Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* translated in 1911, - all of which stood on shelves alongside T. Fisher Unwin's 4-volume selected works (which included the Haussmann and Gray translation of the *Genealogy of Morals*, the Tille translation of *Zarathustra*, the Common translations of *Twilight of the Idols*, *Antichrist*, and the two Wagner-works of 1888, and Johanna Volz's translation of *The Dawn of Day*).

In parallel to the *Bulletin* circle in Sydney, a group of Melbourne bohemians revolved around the restaurant *Fasoli's* in the 1890s and 1900s. R.H. Croll *I Recall: Collections and Recollections* reports that "So far as Melbourne was concerned, Bohemia centered in Fasoli's in Lonsdale Street, with the willow tree in the back yard." (p.43). Most significant is the figure of Hugh McKay, whose letters to Leon Brodzky (anglicized to "Spencer Brodney") detail McKay's understanding of Nietzsche, and reflect the climate of discussion at Fasoli's at that time. McKay's circle at that time included Louis Esson (Vance Palmer *Louis Esson and the Australian Theatre*), E.J. Brady and Leon Brodzky. Also important to McKay was A.G. Stephens, *Bulletin* Red Page editor (who called himself "the red pagan" in 1904).

	<u>SLV call #</u>
<i>Australian Journal</i> (1865-1962)	LTM 101
<i>Dawn</i> (1888-1905)	LTM 106
<i>Cosmos Magazine</i> (1894-99)	SLT 052.94 C82M
<i>Lone Hand</i> (1907-21)	SLF 052.9 L84
<i>The Free Lance</i> (April-Oct 1896)	RareLTF 052.9 R14
<i>The Bookfellow</i> (1899-1925)	SLTF 052.9 B644A
<i>Triad</i> (1893-1927)	SLTF 052.9 T73
<i>Booklover</i> (1899-1921)	LTM 50
<i>Steele Rudd's Magazine</i> (1904-1927)	SLT 819.905 ST3
<i>Art in Australia</i> (1919-24)	A 709.94 R39A

<i>Native Companion</i> (Jan-Dec 1907)	MC 819.905 N21C
index by Carol Mills 1999	SLT 819.905 N21C
<i>Birth</i> (1916-22)	SLT 052.9 B539
<i>Vision</i> (1923-4)	RareLT 819.905 V82
<i>Australian Mercury</i> (single issue 1935)	MC819.905 AU7ME
<i>Venture</i> (single issue 1937)	LTP 819.905 V56
<i>Publicist</i> (1936-1942)	MCF 052.9 P965
<i>Melbourne University Magazine</i> (1907-79)	SLT 378.945 M48M

also:

Hugh McCrae, <i>Satyrs and Sunlight</i>	1909 edn	MCF 819.91 M137
	1911 edn	MCF 821.2 M137S
	1928 edn	RareLTF A821.2 M137S

Hugh McCrae, *My Father and My Father's Friends* RARELT A821.2 M137M;
 also manuscripts Box 3884/5 MS 13329; and Box 3723/11 MS 13051

Dr. Augustin Lodewyckx	<i>Das Deutschtum in Australien</i> (1932)	
	<i>Das Deutschtum in Victoria</i> (1934)	MC 919.4 L82D

E. Roberty <i>Frederic Nietzsche</i> (1902)	S 193 N55ZS
Henry L. Mencken <i>The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche</i> (1908)	S 193 N55ZM
M. A. Meugge, <i>Friedrich Nietzsche</i> (1908)	S 921.3 N55M
Anthony Mario Ludovici <i>Nietzsche and Art</i> (1911)	A 701 L96
Georges Chatterton-Hill <i>The philosophy of Nietzsche</i> (1912)	S 193 N55ZH
Paul Carus <i>Nietzsche and other exponents of individualism</i> (1914)	S 193.9 N55Zc
A. Wolf, <i>The Philosophy of Nietzsche</i> (1915)	B 193 N55WE

Norman Lindsay <i>Creative Effort</i>	(Sydney, 1920 edition)	RARELT 701 L64
	(London 1924 edition)	Rare Books MC 701 L64

Jack Lindsay <i>Dionysos : Nietzsche contra Nietzsche</i> (1928)	RARELT 193.9 N55Zlin
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The Antichrist of Nietzsche : a New Version in English by P.R. Stephensen ; with illustrations by Norman Lindsay	RARELTEF 094 F214n
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Patrick Bridgwater *Nietzsche in Anglosaxony: a study of Nietzsche's impact on English and American literature* (1972) S 820.90091 B76

David Thatcher *Nietzsche in England, 1890-1914 : the growth of a reputation*
 Bailleau Old Quad 193 N677.t