

Henry Lawson. Franca Cavagnoli, Ed. *Racconti*. Rome, Italy:

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Henry Lawson (1867–1922), a prolific writer of short stories and poems set in the bush in the Australian colonial period, is well known for his attention to characters and dialogues and for the use of a sharp writing style that matches the harshness and severity of life in the Australian outback between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Racconti is a collection of short stories by Lawson translated into Italian by Translation Studies students supervised by Franca Cavagnoli (the Italian translator of Mark Twain, David Malouf, Toni Morrison, J. M. Coetzee and others). Cavagnoli reviewed all of the students' translations, wrote the afterword, a contextualising chapter on the history and culture of Australia in the colonial period, and maintained oversight of the whole publication. *Racconti* includes some of the most iconic short stories by Lawson, such as "A Double Buggy at Lahey's Creek" and "The Loaded Dog," here with the titles "Un calesse doppio a Lahey's Creek" and "Il cane carico."

Lawson's characters are skillfully and meticulously constructed, especially those that recur in different short stories, such as Joe Wilson in "La cognata di Brighten" (Brighten's Sister-in-law) and "Un calesse doppio a Lahey's Creek" (A Double Buggy at Lahey Creek) in this collection. They are diggers, drovers, riders, shearers, lovers and, by and large, people who live the harsh reality of the Australian bush, a topos of Australian literature.

This dominant theme runs throughout Australian writing as a primary force. It is the “matrix of our sentiments and ideals, symbol of a distinctive national character.”¹

The bush in Lawson’s short stories is far more than mere background to the events, but rather an entity which shapes the lives of those who live it and, given its predominance in Australian prose and poetry, shaped Australian literature alike. The bush is a remote, threatening and hostile environment that hardens the people who inhabit it. The hostile landscape of the bush is mirrored realistically in *Racconti*, with no operations of adaptation to the Western culture, but rather with great respect for the original. The words “bush” and “outback,” for instance, have not been translated into Italian, as they depict a unique reality with no equivalents in the Italian landscape. In order for Italian readers to embark on a journey to the Australian colonial period, names of trades and business also remain in English in the Italian translation. There is also a valuable glossary provided at the end of the volume. Readers who are familiar with Australian culture-specific elements and, in particular, elements belonging to the colonial period, are not distracted by reading footnotes explaining these elements; while readers who are not familiar with such elements can easily turn to the glossary to discover what the term “billy” means, for example. The glossary, Cavagnoli’s explicative afterword and her contextualising chapter are part of a translational strategy to ensure that Italian readers comprehend the setting of Lawson’s short stories. This comprehension enables them to travel to the reality depicted in the short stories. I believe that this journey to a foreign place, the Australia of the colonial period, is the very aim of literary translation.

The harshness of the environment in which Lawson’s short stories take place influences the characters and their dialogues. It is not by chance that Lawson’s characters speak a language just as crude as the place they inhabit. The dialogues of the characters in Lawson’s short stories are abrupt, harsh, and straight to the point. They are informal and full of exclamations. This important aspect of Lawson’s writing technique has been successfully rendered in *Racconti*: the Italian characters speak an abrupt, straightforward informal Italian, and they make grammatical errors, as the characters do in the original. Even the informalities in the titles have been mirrored with informalities in Italian, for example, “Quel cane là” for “That Dog of Mine.” Occasionally, the Italian in the dialogues in *Racconti* sounds slightly artificial, but generally the brusque dialogues of the original have been successfully mirrored in translation.

Lawson’s characters have been rendered in *Racconti* with all their peculiar features. The humour that characterises them in the original work in

English, is also present in the Italian translation: the curious nicknames in the original—"Box-o'-Tricks," for instance—have been translated into Italian—"Scatola-delle-meraviglie."² This choice, which may seem in contrast with the above strategy, maintains the humour in the Italian translation, one of the key elements of Lawson's style. Had the translators left the nicknames in English in *Racconti*, the humour, so distinctively Lawsonian, would have been lost in translation.

The narrated parts in Lawson's short stories contain abrupt, direct descriptions of the weather or the setting: "scrub indescribably dismal—everything damp, dark, and unspeakably dreary."³ These have been maintained in a similar manner in *Racconti*: "la boscaglia lugubre in un modo indescrivibile—ogni cosa umida, scura e indicibilmente desolata," even though the Italian language tends to use more words than English.

I trust a great effort was made in order to maintain the main features of Lawson's short stories: the peculiar characters, their quick dialogues, the humour, and Lawson's style of narration. The bush, the dominant aspect in Lawson's short stories, is also an overarching theme in *Racconti* as a symbol of the harshness of the colonial life and a reminder of what life in Australia in this period was like. My analysis of the translation of these short stories found that neither this authentic element, nor the Lawsonian writing technique were lost in translation.

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NOTES

¹ T. Inglis Moore, *Social Patterns in Australian Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 19.

² Henry Lawson, *Collected Stories of Henry Lawson*, "Macquarie's Mate," (Ringwood, Victoria: Viking O'Neil, 1987), 189.

³ Lawson, *Collected Stories*, 134.