

*I did not realise then the restlessness which always filled
Harry's heart and soul, a state which was entirely due to the
blood that ran in his veins – wanderer's blood.*

Bertha Lawson, *My Henry Lawson* (1943)

IN THE SUPREME COURT
of New South Wales
Matrimonial Causes Jurisdiction.

In re HENRY LAWSON of Manly in the State
of New South Wales Author and Journalist
And BERTHA MARIE LOUISA¹ LAWSON (formerly
BERTHA MARIE LOUISA BREDT. Spinster) his wife.

On this third day of April in the year of our Lord
one thousand nine hundred and three, BERTHA MARIE
LOUISA LAWSON wife of HENRY LAWSON of Manly in the
State of New South Wales Author and Journalist being
duly sworn maketh oath and saith as follows.

1. I was on the fifteenth day of April A.D. One
thousand eight [*sic*] hundred and ninety six, lawfully
married to HENRY LAWSON at Sydney in New South Wales
according to the rites of the Church of England.

2. I was born at Bairnsdale in the State of
Victoria and am at the present that is to say at
the date of the institution of this suit and have
for three years and upwards been domiciled in New
South Wales. My husband I was informed by him and
believe was born at Grenfell in the State of New
South Wales and is at the present time that is to
say at the date of the institution of this suit and
has been for three years and upwards been domiciled
in New South Wales.

3. I and my said husband have had issue of our said
marriage two children to wit JOSEPH HENRY LAWSON aged

five years and one month and BERTHA MARIE LOUISA
LAWSON aged three years and one month.

4. My husband has during three years and upwards been
an habitual drunkard and habitually been guilty of
cruelty towards me.

5. My husband has been guilty of cruelty towards me
[sic].

6. The cruelty alleged in paragraphs four and five of
this. My affidavit consists of the acts and matters
following. That my husband during the last three
years struck me in the face and about the body and
blackened my eye and hit me with a bottle and attempted
to stab me and pulled me out of bed when I was ill
and purposely made a noise in my room when I was ill
and pulled my hair and repeatedly used abusive and
insulting language to me and was guilty of divers
other acts of cruelty to me whereby my health and
safety are endangered.

Bertha Marie Louise Lawson [handwritten signature]

Sworn by the Deponent on the day
and year first before written
Before me. At Sydney

[signature unclear]
A Commissioner for Affidavits
April 3rd, 1903²



Girlie,

Do try to forgive and forget. My heart is breaking and I can't live without you. Remember I was ill, very ill, and not responsible for what I said. It was all my fault. If I make you suffer, think how I have suffered. I have not touched a drink and am working hard. Don't think I'm a coward and afraid of the money. I have paid it into court and making plenty. Dearie I love you with all my heart and soul and will never say an unkind word to you again. Don't listen to friends and neighbours – listen to me.

I will bury the past if you can. Come to me tonight and save me. You don't know what I'm asking you to save me from. Let us have one more try for happiness. If I did not love you so much I might not have taken notice of little things. If you can't come, at least let little Bertha come to me 'till Monday. Don't let pride stand in your way.

Remember the happy days we had once. Only think of me as the man I was and will be again. Dearie I was kind – it was only that woman who wrecked our lives. Don't be influenced by two-faced mischief makers but come to your unhappy husband.

Forgive me and come to me and we'll be happy in spite of it all.

Harry (I'll write very hard until midnight).³

1

I slip into the salt water, my goggles clinging to my eyes. Sunbathing backpackers languish on daybeds along the pool's edge, the glass fence framing their burning bodies. Out on the harbour, divided from the pool by a timber boardwalk, Riviera speedboats cruise by, splashing Sydney's wealth.

Lingering at the end of the pool, I move aside as another swimmer strokes to a stop. He stands up and scrutinises the sky.

'This might ruin our day,' he says. Another storm is moving in. But it seems too early in the season for snap storms.



The storm keeps its distance but it shades Henry Lawson's statue, his most prominent memorial. Wet from the swim, and for once not in a hurry, I stop to scrutinise him.

Henry has weathered the summers well since he was unveiled in 1931. Sculpted in bronze by George Lambert, he stands atop a plinth of sandstone, with those big, sensitive eyes looking out

over the Royal Botanic Garden and The Domain. The Henry Lawson Literary Society protested that the sculpture's location was too hidden away, arguing upon visiting the site that it was 'one of the very nooks the poet would have revelled in for contemplation and the writing of a set of verse; but certainly not the place for his monument; it is too unfrequented, too suggestive of obscurity'.¹

At a preview of the plaster model, held at Lambert's studio, this Henry was described by critics as 'an imposing piece of sculpture in larger than life size', and a 'remarkable likeness'.² Lambert had first modelled Henry's head on that of Jim, the poet's son, who'd sat for the sculptor to help create the memorial to his father. The dog was modelled on a hound from a local rescue home. But then, prior to the showing in his Sydney studio, Lambert had replaced the first plaster head because it had fallen off overnight, onto the studio floor.³ Henry was as fragile in the art made in his honour as he was in life.

Perhaps the Lawson society were right in saying that the statue is hidden away. Since I've read Bertha's affidavit, Henry looks more shadowy than ever.

Henry's hand seems to form around an invisible mug, perhaps of billy tea, but more likely it's a beer. At the unveiling, the Memorial Fund's chairperson instead said Lambert wanted to capture Henry's mannerism: 'Lawson's hand was not raised in gesticulation whilst reciting, but "so as to see a distant hill or as if to recall far horizons of memory" – a familiar gesture of the poet's'.⁴

Still looks like he wants a beer. The *Bulletin* cartoonist David Low apparently wanted Lawson's line, 'Beer makes you feel as you ought to feel without a beer',⁵ as the statue's inscription.

At the end of the path is Mrs Macquarie's Chair, where Henry Lawson and Bertha Bredt took their first stroll together late in 1895.

The ironies of Henry's statue multiply here in The Domain, where he stands today as Bertha wanted then – stable. If only Henry had been like his statue in life. But then Bertha wouldn't have been seduced by his poetry, by his literary beauty, by seeing herself as his muse, which her critics suggest she thought she was.

But once you become the wife, you are associated with domesticity rather than divine inspiration. Then come the divorce, the demands, the need. The lack.



On Christmas Day my daughter's father, Dan, posts on Facebook from LA airport. For Ruby, Facebook is also a father-positioning system. A jazz pianist, he is a five-star gypsy, working on luxury cruise ships that take him a hemisphere away. When Ruby was little, she tried to follow him on a world map on her wall until it was a mass of scribbles curling at the corners, like our marriage.

We've spent the days leading up to Christmas with Ruby's aunt, Mariana, who recently split from her husband. Our friendship has endured my divorce from her brother five years ago, even though such convulsions usually result in divorce from the ex's family as well. She has a white cottage near the beach, into which she's squeezed her four children after moving out from a waterfront mansion. They and Ruby are in a sunburnt slump around the Xbox in the living room. Outside, plastic strings of Christmas lights hang in the Boxing Day sun. Despite the post-Christmas mess, the cottage has a feminine feel, and resoluteness. Artworks that her husband disliked are now hung around the house.

She stacks the dishwasher with listless intent. 'I'm tired,' she says. 'I live on a shoestring. The credit card's gone. It's hard doing everything – looking after the kids, the house – and working as well.'

He's paying child support and at least she had some savings. She is managing to pay the rent, so she knows it could be worse. But it's still such a shock.



When I go back to town Ruby stays on with her cousins at the beach for the following week. Even though she is a teenager now, when she is away the quietness is unsettling. Sometimes I still panic – has she been left behind somewhere? Have I forgotten to pick her up? She is an ever present responsibility in my thoughts, if not in my presence. When she was little, a boyfriend once told me unthinkingly: ‘She is a burden on you.’

‘She is my child,’ I snapped.

Imagine Bertha, as a new single mother, having a similar response. She is in my thoughts now too. On the day the affidavit was lodged in the Divorce Court, Friday 3 April 1903, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on a drought relief concert, and that the Women's Social and Political League had met, and that a suspected attempted wife murderer who had cut his own throat had survived.⁶

Bertha stated in her affidavit: ‘My husband has during three years and upwards been an habitual drunkard and habitually been guilty of cruelty towards me.’⁷

History is what you are told, what you remember and what you learn. Once I'd been told, in an offhand conversation with a literary friend, that Henry did not (or could not, as his supporters defend) pay regular child support – from that day on, Henry was no longer a long-ago poet to me. He was a father to children. He was a husband. There was a wife, who was clearly bringing up the children with little help.

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I keep wondering, how did Bertha live as a separated, single mother in the early 20th century, when women had barely won the vote? Did the Divorce Court support her? Or Henry?

Henry was cruel, Bertha alleged.

An habitual drunkard. Blacked my eye. Endangered me.

The questions keep doing laps in my head.

Included in a letter from Henry Lawson to Bertha Bredt at her home at McNamara's Bookshop, 221 Castlereagh St, Sydney, 5 March 1896, this poem was published in *The Bulletin* on 28 March 1896:

After All

The brooding ghosts of Australian night have gone from
the bush and town;
My spirit revives in the morning breeze, though it died
when the sun went down;
The river is high and the stream is strong, and the grass is
green and tall,
And I fain would think that this world of ours is a good
world after all.

The light of passion in dreamy eyes, and a page of truth
well read,

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The glorious thrill in a heart grown cold of the spirit I
thought was dead,
A song that goes to a comrade's heart, and a tear of pride
let fall
And my soul is strong! and the world to me is a grand
world after all!

Let our enemies go by their old dull tracks, and theirs be
the fault or shame
(The man is bitter against the world who has only himself
to blame);
Let the darkest side of the past be dark, and only the good
recall;
For I must believe that the world, my dear, is a kind world
after all.

It well may be that I saw too plain, and it may be I was blind;
But I'll keep my face to the dawning light, though the devil
may stand behind!
Though the devil may stand behind my back, I'll not see
his shadow fall,
But read the signs in the morning stars of a good world
after all.

Rest, for your eyes are weary, girl – you have driven the
worst away –
The ghost of the man that I might have been is gone from
my heart to-day;
We'll live for life and the best it brings till our twilight
shadows fall;

My heart grows brave, and the world, my girl, is a good
world after all.¹



My copy of Bertha's memoir, *My Henry Lawson*,² has a watermarked cover and the spine is flaking; yet somehow, like a bad marriage, it stays together. The fragile pages give her account of Henry's early life with his mother, the feminist Louisa Lawson, and his father, Peter, on a parched property in New South Wales. Peter panned for glints of gold and Louisa tried to turn the land into a farm, only to feel more fenced in by the restrictions of rural life. Foreseeing a future of drought-blighted drudgery, Louisa instead took their youngest son, Peter, and daughter, Gertrude, to Sydney. The elder Henry soon followed.

In late 1895 he met Bertha near her stepfather's bohemian bookshop, McNamara's, which smelt of beer and onions.³ She said she wavered and resisted Henry at first. He'd been about to go to New Zealand; feeling deflated by her refusal, he decided to go off as he'd planned. But then, according to Bertha, no sooner had he docked in New Zealand than he caught a ship back.

She wrote, 'He pleaded with me to be married right away. I refused. Next morning, I received his poem *After All* and a letter.'⁴

However, there was still Mrs McNamara to convince. Bertha's younger sister, Hilda, 17, was already dating Jack Lang and now here was Henry, 28, eyeing Bertha, only 19. Mothers are suspicious of gypsies, writers and artists; Mrs McNamara may have been the 'Mother of the Labor Movement',⁵ and a bohemian herself, but the politics of marriage suitability were quite different.

Bertha recalled in her memoir:

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After we had known each other for about six weeks we became engaged. But my dear little mother did not approve of the match, nor did other members of my family, Henry was very deaf and delicate. He had no worldly goods – nothing but his literary genius – and there were obstacles. But we did not heed these, being sure that together we could overcome everything.⁶

She was more candid with a friend, author Ruth Park, who, with husband D'Arcy Niland co-wrote a radio play in 1952: *The Courtship of Henry Lawson*. In an interview with an elderly Bertha, Ruth recorded on gold paper in fast, pencilled notes that Bertha's mother 'blew up Henry' saying 'she was too young'; and, 'You've got no home, nothing settled. How can you provide for her?' But Bertha said that Henry was resolute: 'I'm going to marry her and that's all there is to it' and 'he would give up the drink' if Mrs McNamara gave her consent.⁷

When I told my father a century later that I was marrying a musician, he said, 'Does he have an earring? Who will look after you?' Looking back at the photos of our wedding, I see a slightly stunned girl in a white dress, and a husband who, like the photos, has faded away a decade after that day.



Henry is part of the city. He is a sudden appearance during a stroll. Walking from the city through the gardens, the Henry Lawson Gate exits to Mrs Macquarie's Chair and the harbourside pool. A postcard featuring a drawing of Henry Lawson's headstone on the cliff top at Waverley Cemetery is on a stand at Bondi. On a bushwalk around Berry's Bay a verse from his poem 'Kerosene Bay'

is inscribed in the concrete. A lady says loudly on her mobile phone, 'I didn't know you were up here! I'm going to tell my sister, who lives right down in Henry Lawson Drive.'

He keeps turning up. In Canberra his long, emaciated writing hand, as sculpted by his friend Nelson Illingworth, is in a glass-encased display of a gold cast at the National Library of Australia. There's an annual Henry Lawson Festival in Grenfell, where he was born. Before Gallipoli, he was the poet who created mateship. The Dickens of the bush. He's been mythologised, anthologised and analysed.

Bertha has been forgotten. Filed away in boxes of letters, birthday cards and notes.



Ghost signs remain on the streets. A leather-goods shop sign is bleached into brick on a Castlereagh Street wall. Further along, at number 221, is the site of McNamara's bohemian bookshop, the default living room for writers, politicians and intellectuals, including one lanky poet, Henry Lawson, and a future state premier, Jack Lang. Where once communist posters hung in the demolished bookshop windows, the Bank of Sydney now displays its interest rates in its windows, which are painted a plain steel-grey. Scaffolding covers the nearby corner where Bertha said she first met Henry, as he loped down the street on his way to the bookshop. She told Ruth Park that she was impressed by 'his deep brown eyes. Big marvellous eyes. The most wonderful eyes I've ever seen', and that Henry had a 'soft voice and quiet smile'.⁸

Writing about Bertha in her memoir *Fishing in the Styx*, Ruth Park asked Henry's friend, New Zealand journalist Tom Mills: 'Why did Henry fall for Bertha?'

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'Oh,' he said decisively, 'it was the shape that caught Henry.'

D'Arcy, when he heard, laughed. 'Sounds like a music-hall song!' But it was true that even at seventy-five or -six small round Bertha had an hour-glass shape, probably with the aid of corsets.⁹

Henry, a corseted Bertha and her escort, the bookshop's assistant Karl Lindgrist, made their way to Mrs Macquarie's Chair, where Lindgrist left them alone. He must have felt miffed at Henry weaving between the shapely Bertha and him; Bertha told Ruth Park that Karl was keen on her shape too.

More than a century later, I walk through the Botanic Gardens to the Chair, and wonder if the bats shat on Henry and Bertha too. There has been a campaign to move the bats on as they are destroying the old trees, but they cling to the branches above.



Along the Circular Quay boardwalk a plaque is dedicated to Henry's confidant, Dame Mary Gilmore. She said she knew the truth about Henry and Bertha, providing an alternative narrative of the romance. Whom to believe?

The Dame argued:

Last week (1922) Frank McGrath of the old Edinburgh Hotel – in those days the writers' rendezvous – said, speaking voluntarily: 'And by Jove! don't I remember his marriage! She chased him till she got him! She never let him alone till she caught him ... she threatened to commit suicide or something, and said that her father was going to turn her out into the streets if he didn't marry her!' It was what Henry himself told me once

in a broken-hearted moment when his wife had been particularly cruel to him.¹⁰

Ruth Park and D'Arcy Niland were friends with both Mary and Bertha in their later lives. Comparing the two women in her memoir, Ruth observed: 'We both found Bertha very likeable. She was durable, humorous and kindly. My impression was that, when young, she had probably been a voluptuous little bundle. Still she gave off that indefinable fragrance that attracts men.'¹¹

Henry's publisher, George Robertson, upon learning of the engagement, told his personal assistant, Rebecca Wiley:

She had great big hazel eyes, and shining with excitement; they were undoubtedly very much in love with each other ... but Henry is a confirmed drinker; had at times a very nasty temper and all the other things that make a genius very difficult to live with.

He foresaw 'nothing but tragedy in it for the both of them'.

Robertson was so concerned, he pulled Bertha aside.

I spent a whole morning pleading with her not to take this irrevocable step. I told her I had three girls of my own and I'd rather see them dead, than to marry a temperamental genius who was a drunkard as well. It was all in vain, she knew she could keep him straight, love would do it, and so on.¹²

Henry's mother, Louisa, sided with the worried publisher and with Bertha's mother. 'The woman who cannot give a better reason than she is in love, is likely to come to grief. It is not *that* she loves,

but *why* or *what* she loves, that is the all important question,' she warned prophetically in 'Unhappy Love Matches', published in her feminist paper, *The Dawn*, in 1889.¹³

Who really knows? Perhaps their daughter, who was christened Bertha Louisa after her mother and grandmother, but nicknamed Barta by Henry. Her unpublished notes about her parents nestle among other Lawson family folders in the Mitchell Library:

It is certain she [Mother] and Dad did love each other ... They were young and full of hope. They were eager for the future ... It was he who saw the situation that might lie before them both – not Mother, headstrong, eager, impetuous, wanting nothing to stand in the way. Dad was it. J Le Gay [Brereton] told me that he came to him for help. He was so worried. He loved her. He wanted to marry her. He was afraid. If he couldn't depend on himself, what would happen? Calamity for him but most of all for her. He had more than half made up his mind to get out of Sydney and go back to the bush. He did not know what to do. J Le Gay told me, he said: 'Look Henry, I've known you to do silly things, but I've never known you to run away before.' Dad thanked him and went off. Dad saw very clearly, even when he couldn't help himself, in the tragic hopelessness of his own situation, to do anything about it.¹⁴

The hopelessness.



Bertha recalled that on 15 April 1896 Henry arrived to where she was living with Mrs Schaebel in the inner-city suburb of Newtown, and he was 'begging her to come to town':

My trousseau was all ready and we were to be married at St Stephen's Newtown. But Harry had not been able to win over the family though he did obtain my mother's consent. On 15 April he arrived early in the morning and begged me to come to town and meet a dear friend of his. He said, 'I want you to look very nice so put on your wedding dress to please me.' But I was horrified at the thought of wearing my wedding dress before my wedding. However we finally agreed on my travelling dress – A green silk frock with a brown hat wreathed in poppies!

We told Mrs Schaebel we'd be back by half past three. When we got to town, Harry showed me another indignant letter he had received. He was very troubled and said that he felt convinced that unless we married straight away, we would be separated in the end. So he had arranged with a clergyman to marry us privately if only I was willing. He showed me his special licence. But I told him that was impossible. Our wedding had been arranged, the guests invited, and all plans fixed for our Blue Mountain honeymoon. In any case, I thought Mrs Schaebel should be told. But Harry said, we could be married and then go straight out and tell her. He was so afraid, in view of all the opposition, that something would come between us; he had a strong intuition that we might be parted. And loving him so dearly, I felt that there was much truth in what he said and I consented. We went straight round to the clergyman's home and were married – a member of his family acting as a witness.

We started off afterwards for the Newtown tram, but Harry said no, we must go out in state in a cab as befitted the occasion. So we drove out to Newtown to find Mrs Schaebel very angry, because I was late. Harry bent down and kissed her and said,

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‘That doesn’t matter, because she’s my wife now. Here is our certificate.’ Mrs Schaebel was most upset, and asked what she was to do about the bridesmaids and the guests. He said, ‘Never mind, just say we are married.’ She was very indignant but because she was very fond of us both she forgave us in the end.¹⁵

Henry, 28, wrote his occupation as ‘journalist’ on the wedding certificate and Bertha, 19, was a ‘gentlewoman’. Her parents and his mother knew nothing of the ceremony. Neither, it seems, did their families or Henry’s publishers, although Bertha says that Henry obtained her mother’s consent: ‘He had wheedled the signature out of my mother. Perhaps she felt as I did that to have refused him when we loved one another so much would have broken his heart.’¹⁶

The marriage cost one pound, which Henry borrowed from his friend Louis Becke, a novelist and short-story writer who wrote about travels in the South Pacific.

Mrs Isabel Byers, who looked after Henry in later years, believed that Henry loved Bertha, but he rushed into the marriage. She said Henry told her:

that he was not deeply in love with Miss Bredt at the time he married her but that as time went on, he grew to love her more and more ...

Miss Bredt was unhappy at home when she came to know Lawson, and that Lawson out of sympathy for her took her away from her home and placed her under the care of Mrs. Schaebel. Mrs. Lawson’s brother said this was really a case of abduction as Miss Bredt was not of age and that Lawson on hearing of this arranged for a hasty marriage.¹⁷

If Bertha was disappointed and dismayed with the rushed plainness of the day, or that she did not wear her dress, she did not reveal it in her memoir. When you think about it, she rarely reveals anything at all.

But Bertha told Ruth Park that, upon being shown the marriage certificate, her mother shrieked, ‘You are both lunatics. Henry Lawson get out of my house!’ She locked the door and Bertha scrambled out the window.¹⁸

Bertha recalled: ‘We spent a happy day together and in the evening went to a hotel near St Andrews Cathedral, I think it was the Town Hall Hotel. On the following morning we went hunting for rooms in Darlinghurst ... in Forbes St we found a tiny flat.’¹⁹

The Royal Town Hall Hotel, where Henry and Bertha spent their wedding night, was periodically fined for Sunday trading, but is now a 7-Eleven store. At the nearby Edinburgh Pub that Mary Gilmore dubbed ‘Botany Bay bohemia’s favourite meeting place’, mottled tiles decorate the outside walls and a chalkboard advertises Happy Hour. A conservative crowd of tradies, tourists and punters hang around the bar and the betting screen. Bohemia has moved on.

A monograph of Harold Cazneaux’s photographs of Sydney in the early 20th century captures washing lines hanging between dusty lines; a wet North Sydney street dominated by a town-hall spire; and a row of hansom cabs with docile horses waiting for rides in a city with over 3000 pubs and 288,000 people.²⁰ Artist and cartoonist Norman Lindsay drew wharfies, policemen, Chinese and hatted men at the Quay, where he went to the *Bulletin* offices nearby and ate at cheap cafes. As today there was constant public debate about drunkenness brought on ‘by the Australian habit of shouting’.²¹ And there was talk, always, of the weather: in summer,

snap thunderstorms, a restless heat and downpours that streamed down the streets.



The day after the wedding, they went to the *Bulletin* offices. Imagine Henry holding Bertha's hand on the way to the office, the horns of the harbour ferries sounding like a warning. *The Bulletin's* editor, JF Archibald, like George Robertson, was well aware that Henry was high maintenance, although he was still writing and being published regularly. An achieving alcoholic.

Earlier in the decade, Archibald had sent Henry out into the Australian bush to help the young writer define a drought-damaged landscape, but also because he was already concerned about Henry's health. Archibald asked Henry's friend and fellow writer EJ Brady: 'What's the matter with Lawson? ... He is coming here in the morning with tobacco juice running down his jaw, smelling of stale beer and he has begun to write about the Rocks.'²²

A picture of the two men together is as candid as a photograph from 1918 can be. Henry, tall and lanky in a suit, leans into an older, smaller and still impeccable Archibald. Henry looks like he is listening hard, perhaps because of his partial deafness that developed in childhood, and also perhaps because Archibald was his mentor.²³

At the *Bulletin* office with his bride, Henry announced that they had married.

Bertha recounted that Archibald stepped forward. 'We wish you well,' he said.

'Is this really true?' literary editor AG Stephens asked. 'And not a joke of Harry's?'

'It's quite true,' Bertha assured him. 'We were married yesterday. I'm going to try and make him happy.'

Stephens squeezed her hand. 'I hope he is going to try and make you happy.'

Bertha wrote:

This announcement was like a bolt from the blue; it staggered everyone to Harry's joy. But it upset me a little to have us regarded as freaks. But I found it was not I who astonished them, but the fact I had married a poet genius whom they regarded, apparently, as a man who could never make an income to maintain a home.²⁴



Soon after the wedding, the Lawsons left Sydney for a short-lived stint in the outskirts of the gold-rush town of Perth. It was a sprawling makeshift settlement, and they lived in a flimsy, patchwork hessian tent on a floor of upturned corrugated-iron cases with contaminated water, and an oil drum for an oven.

Bertha recalled:

Henry still wanted to go to Coolgardie or some other place in the goldfields; but first he wrote to his friend, Smiler Hales, for advice ... His reply was to the effect it would be madness to bring a young woman out there. So we stayed [in Perth]. Harry did not want to leave me, keenly as he wanted to dig for gold.²⁵

While they were in the west, Henry's book *While the Billy Boils* was published but the royalties didn't assist their finances. Gold was more of a glimmer, a rush of hope, and their hunt for wealth turned back to the intangible gold in Henry's mind. They sold their camp for 35 pounds and returned to Sydney.

Henry's *Bulletin* colleague Bertram Stevens became friendly with them after their return:

Mrs. Lawson was young and attractive, her eyes being particularly fine, her voice soft and rich. As we walked home afterwards she talked to me as one who was devoted to Henry but had already discovered the inconvenience of having a genius for a husband.

... He [Henry] had some social ambitions and would like to have had a comfortable home for his wife, but he was too careless and selfish to make any sacrifice to provide one. He had generous impulses but no steadfastness of purpose in any direction.

At this time Lawson certainly had a good deal of respect for his wife and recognised that she was trying to keep him from drink for his own good. He amused himself by dodging her efforts. He did not disclose to her all he earned from the *Bulletin*. On paydays he would hide money in his boots and plant a few sixpences in corners of the room. When those tricks failed, he used to have small deposits of cash with a friendly barmaid to provide against dry days.²⁶

Stevens said he tried mostly to keep Henry, and himself, relatively sober but fell foul of Bertha when they arrived home raucous and late: they were met by an 'avenging Mrs. Lawson at the gate. Henry blurted out something and I laughed – she didn't. Women don't have a sense of humour ... As Henry persisted in departing from the sober path, his wife wanted to get him away from Sydney.'²⁷

Bertha presented herself as the steerer of their marriage in these early years, searching for opportunities for financial stability but also wanting to 'leave him free to write'.²⁸ She turned to Archibald

for help, as he had been Henry's patron for his Bourke expedition chronicling the drought in 1892. Imagine Archibald, impeccably dressed in a suit that reflected his Francophile impulses, regarding Bertha in his *Bulletin* office. Archibald perhaps recalled why he had first sent Henry bush, where bars were in different towns rather than in different streets, and where Henry could be inspired rather than intoxicated.

Yet there may have been another reason for Bertha's determination to move to New Zealand. A 'shape' had caught Henry's eye at sculptor Nelson Illingworth's studio. Depending on which version you read, Hannah Thornburn may have been a 'plain but delicate' girl.²⁹ Or she may have been barely five foot, with red hair and grey eyes, a full mouth that artists liked to paint, and slender, 'like a clinging vine'.³⁰ Hannah was a bookseller's daughter, a Sunday school teacher, and an artists' model for Henry's friend, the curly-haired, poncho-wearing Illingworth. Nicknamed Buster, he'd also sculpted Norman Lindsay's second wife, the artists' model Rose Soadey. Rose described how, when modelling at the Illingworth household, she passed through the kitchen where Buster's wife was fanning herself and ignoring the woman going to her husband while the children argued over who would do the washing-up. Henry must have walked through that kitchen, and come upon Hannah sensuously wrapped in a cloak in, between poses. Henry's biographers – their hardbacks now with dust hanging off them – range from those convinced that Henry was in love with a real rival to Bertha to those wondering if the new relationship was only a creation of his fertile, romantic mind.