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MATESHIP AND THE FEMALE BODY IN BARBARA BAYNTON'S "SQUEAKER'S MATE"

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Abstract

"Mateship", or companionship and loyalty in adverse situations, was a common theme in late nineteenth century Australian short stories. Women were excluded from the practice of mateship and were not usually the protagonists of those narratives, being either kept in the background as mothers and housewives, or not present at all in the plots. Going against these stereotypes, in Barbara Baynton's story "Squeaker's Mate", the "mate" is an independent, strong and hard-working woman. Baynton explores the gloomy consequences of this reversal of expected gender roles, especially after an accident leaves the protagonist paralysed and no longer in control of her body. What occurs in "Squeaker's Mate" is a kind of "anti-mateship", in which irony serves as a device to expose gender relations and the exclusion of women from what is traditionally considered heroic and historical. In "Squeaker's Mate", Baynton questioned the adoption of "mateship" as an Australian value more than half a century before that discussion started to draw formal critical attention.

Key words: Barbara Baynton; "Squeaker's Mate"; female body; mateship.

In the 1950s Simone de Beauvoir wrote that becoming a woman is not only a question of existentialist choice but also a result of the male lenses through which women's bodies and physiology—such as the "incompleteness" of their genitalia, their menstrual periods, their ability to bear children—have been seen throughout the ages. De Beauvoir also attributed the exclusion of women from history to the functionalities of the female body:

The warrior risks his own life to raise the prestige of the horde—his clan. This is how he brilliantly proves that life is not the supreme value for man but that it must serve ends far greater than itself. The worst curse on woman is her exclusion from warrior expeditions; it is not in giving life but in risking his life that man raises himself above the animal; this is why throughout humanity, superiority has been granted not to the sex that gives birth but to the one that kills. (73-74)

In other words, because of their procreative function, women have been held back from what is traditionally considered historical: exploit, battle and conquest.

Similarly to what occurred in different parts of the world, it wasn't until the last quarter of the twentieth century that the agency of women in Australian history—their active role in conquering the land and constructing the country—started to be acknowledged and studied in more depth. Unfortunately, by then, important sections of that history were already irrecoverable. Aboriginal women had lived in Australia for at least 40,000 years and were perfectly adapted to what Europeans found to be an extremely hostile environment. The arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, however, started the process of displacement of aboriginal peoples in their own land and affected their demographics and traditional ways, also hindering access to their (mainly oral) historical legacy. If histories of aboriginal people nowadays are far scantier than one would wish for, aboriginal histories

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told from or taking into account female perspectives are even rarer and sometimes misconstrued. According to Peggy Brock, many of the discussions taking place today regarding the re-inscription of aboriginal women into Australian history and the legislation regarding land custody fail, for instance, to acknowledge ancient matrilineal concepts present in their cultures (8).

As for the poor representation of European-descent women in early Australian history, colonial statistics had a role in the much proclaimed view of Australia as a man's country. In the first fifty years of the settlement, of the 160,000 convicts sent to the colonies, the ratio was of one woman to six men, although in subsequent decades that discrepancy gradually declined. In addition to demographics, European women's survival in colonial times was deemed more problematic than their male counterparts'. According not only to common sense, but also to the Darwinian-style scientific thought prevalent in the nineteenth century, women were biologically (as well as intellectually) less fit than men (Darwin 328), and, thus, more likely to perish either due to the hardships of the three-month journey itself or to its onshore aftermath. The possibilities of disease, rebellions, storms, shipwrecks and the attacks from enemy ships at sea were succeeded, on arrival, by those of famine or food rationing, droughts, floods, bush fires, convict insurrections, attacks by fugitives and bushrangers, feuds with aboriginal peoples, sexual abuse and the general harshness of convict labour conditions.

Researchers have now challenged some of those ideas and justified others based on the social history of the British female convicts sent to Australia. On analysing pre-voyage, onboard and post-voyage data regarding convict transportation to Van Diemen's Land (today known as Tasmania), for instance, Hamish Maxwell-Stewart and Rebecca Kippen have come to the conclusion that mortality rates on convict ships during the voyage to the colonies were indeed around 5% higher for women. But rather than their unfitness to survive the journey, several other factors—among which the poorer maintenance of the ships allotted to transporting women, the lower quantity and quality of their food, but mainly, the presence of children (more

likely to transmit faecal-originated infectious diseases to their mothers)—might account for those figures (23).

One year after disembarking, however, women's survival rates were considerably higher than men's, possibly due to the different styles of institutionalisation to which women were submitted—and also, ironically, because some of them were separated from their children (Maxwell-Stewart and Kippen 24), who were sent to orphanages. And some time after the mid-nineteenth century gold rushes, according to Patricia Grimshaw et al., immigration of single women, but, mainly, a higher percentage of locally-born children, helped balance the gender demographics in an accelerated rhythm—although these births tended to be more concentrated in urban areas (119).

Common sense and the low visibility of women in the very first decades of Australia's history as a British colony, especially in the interior, have, thus, played a part in establishing Australia's reputation as a land where men were more bound to succeed than women. Hegemonic social and historical powers, as Grimshaw et al. put it, deliberately “wanted to portray white colonial settlement as a tale of male courage, or endurance, or adventure”, ignoring or relegating women and non-caucasian individuals to secondary roles (118). The same rationale applies to the first heroes in Australian popular and erudite culture. According to Manning Clark, Europeans used to dismiss as irrelevant myths the complex animist heroes and heroines of aboriginal cultures, at the same time that they took to Australia their own “myth of the benevolent influence of British civilization” and their own (almost exclusively male) pantheon of heroes: the discoverers Cook and Banks, Generals Nelson and Wellington, Shakespeare, Milton and King James. Locally, politicians, aristocrats, judges and colony administrators were the first beneficiaries of official homage (58-59).

As the colonization process advanced, so did patriotic pride. The contact of convicts and free migrants with the land itself proved a determining factor in the establishment of a heroic tradition that would prove lasting in the Australian popular imagination. The first generations of locally-born European descendants—known self-mockingly as

“currency lads and lasses”, in reference to locally minted coins, less valuable than British “sterling”—were the ones who effectively faced the unknown lands of the interior, clearing them for cultivation and livestock, building roads, houses, villages and cities, meanwhile defying police brutality and the taboos deriving from their direct ancestors’ legal or economic statuses. The skills that were valued the most for Australian-bred heroes were, thus, physical ones: the ability to run, swim, shoot or tame wild beasts (Clark 60-61).

In that context, a special category of hero was the selector, or small farmer of nineteenth century Australia. The “free selection” system was an attempt at land reform and incentive to the settlement of the large unoccupied areas in the interior by the governments of the Australian colonies, in which land was leased at relatively low prices. Besides droughts, floods, bush fires and plagues, the poor quality of much of the soil made available to selectors and the unfair competition between selectors and “squatters” (wealthier occupants of the largest and best lots), often ended up in the selectors’ failure to meet government and bank conditions. Other human types raised to the condition of hero were the several classes of itinerant bush workers and wanderers, some of them quite peculiar to Australia: swagmen/sundowners¹, shearers, drovers, station hands, stockmen... Their nomadic habits soon became legendary. Not only did they provide colourful subject matters for poets and writers, but their wanderings also helped spread popular literature from the cities to the outback and vice-versa.

As an all-Australian human type that came to exist from the contact between the white man and the land, the bushman of the 1890s (a period that can encompass the first decades of the twentieth century) became hero of Australian culture and protagonist of yarns, bush ballads, poems, novels and short stories, popularized by wide-reaching periodicals such as the famous *Bulletin Magazine* (cf. Scheidt, 2014). However, it was not until the 1950s that the academic interest on this theme flourished, inspired by the publication of some historical and critical studies, the most influential of those being *The Australian Legend*, by Russel Ward and *The Australian Tradition*, by A. A. Phillips. These authors looked back to

colonial Australia to put together an “Australian identity” theory. One of their conclusions was that the “typical” Australian character and the cultural traditions derived from it were based on rural workers and their habit of forming a special bond known as “mateship” to survive the harsh environment, the large distances and the loneliness of the Australian bush (Ward 99).

Linguistically, “mateship” is a common expression to all English variants but after the Australian colonization the word came to be associated with that country, where, according to *The Australian National Dictionary* (apud Moore 104) it means “the bond between equal partners or close friends; comradeship; comradeship as an ideal”. In the itinerancy-based Australian rural culture, walking the outback tracks between remote farms and being alone on isolated stations for too long might pose a threat to the worker’s physical and mental health and even to his life. Mateship became an antidote against these dangers. For Ward, the ability to share was one of the main tenets of mateship, and a mate was someone with whom one could share “money, goods, and even secret aspirations and for whom even when in the wrong, he was prepared to make almost any sacrifice”(99). The idealization inherent to this concept was very attractive to mid-nineteenth century Australian authors, eager to express the egalitarian inclinations of Australians (as opposed to the class-oriented British society) and the originality and “Australianess” of their writings. From its rural beginnings, mateship would evolve into the World War I legendary heroic principle of “never leaving a mate behind” and would traverse the twentieth century as one of the most cherished Australian tenets. In the 1980s conservative Prime Minister John Howard even attempted to officialise mateship as a national value, by including it in the text of the Australian Constitution (Page 193).

Henry Lawson (1867-1922) was one of the greatest enthusiasts of the concept and became, in Harry Heseltine’s words, the leading preacher of the “gospel of mateship” in his fiction (342). Heseltine’s analysis of Lawson’s stories shows that more than merely reducing mateship to its idealized or political aspects (although he famously does that in “Send Round the

Hat"), Lawson was able to imprint a wide range of different connotations to the term. To quote only a few of the most famous stories, mateship can be personal and sentimental, as in the relationship between Joe Wilson and his mate Jack ("Joe Wilson's Courtship"); unwavering, when two bushmen spin a tall tale to hide from their boss's widow the degradation to which he had fallen before his death ("Telling Mrs. Baker"); clownish in the closeness between a bushman and a corpse ("The bush undertaker"); parodic in the description of the half-hearted efforts of a group of workers to bury the body of a union member unknown to them ("The Union Buries its Dead"); or even ruthless, when mates encourage the schizophrenic break of a bush traveller ("Rats").

A common feature of the protagonists in the stories above, though, is that they are all male. Indeed, in the Australian tradition/legend there was no female version to this mode of "pure masculine camaraderie", as Peter Goodall (88) puts it. For nineteenth century Australian women in the bush, Dale Spender maintains, "there were few compensations for the brutal nature of their existence. Not for them the contentment of the campfire, the opportunity to break bread, tell tales, make mates" (xviii). While men could travel in pairs or small groups, driving herds or in search of seasonal work, their wives were left in charge of the family and the farm, usually miles away from any outside assistance or human contact. Indeed, Lawson's fictional bush is "No Place for a Woman" (the title of one of his short stories) and his female characters go through degrees of hardship and isolation that his bushmen do not usually have to face.

In "The Drover's Wife," one of the most frequently anthologized Australian short stories worldwide, Lawson's heroine is an anonymous bushwoman who, in the absence of her husband, spends a whole night guarding the sleep of her children, after a poisonous snake has infiltrated underneath the floor of her house (and here the image of the snake as proverbial evil coming from the wilderness is no coincidence). This is only one more of the domestic challenges she must deal with single-handedly, and the plot is made up of the memories of such dramatic events during her long vigil: difficult childbirths, the death of a child, a bushfire,

the breaking of a dam, cattle diseases, ferocious animals, threatening individuals knocking on her door, and so on. The crisis has a bitter-sweet closure: at dawn the snake is killed by the faithful family dog but the drover's wife is left with the promise of many other such confrontations, judging for the "sickly daylight break[ing] over the bush" (243). Kay Schaffer concludes that this story

represents the dream of the perfect mother, powered, yet capable of being subdued and mastered without a struggle. [...] "The Drover's Wife" belongs to Lawson and the critical tradition, which mark her sacrifice with a halo of glory which was of a high order. (169-170)

The adoption of women as protagonists was not a mainstream practice among Lawson's contemporaries. In many of the narratives that compose the Australian bush canon, women are either taken for granted as mothers and housewives, and are kept in the background, or are not present at all in the plots. Good examples of the former tendency are Steele Rudd's (1868-1935) famous sketches written from 1895 to 1899, later gathered in *On Our Selection*. The book depicts, in a characteristically Australian self-mocking tone, the strenuous (though often amateurish and ineffective) toils of a rural family always on the verge of defeat to poverty, famine, plagues, rain, fire, droughts, bankruptcy, in fact an astonishing array of disasters of all sorts. Although the first chapters make it clear that the settling on the land had "combined male and female forces" (4), the characters of "Dad" and the sons are always on the forefront, while "Mother" and the daughters receive much less attention from the narrative voice (a quick digital search reveals around 700 occurrences of the word "dad", as opposed to little more than 200 of "mother").

Rudd's matriarch works hard to feed the family and make ends meet, but she also has her moments of amusement, encouraging the children to learn to play musical instruments and promoting periodical dances in her own parlour. Even Lawson's "haggard women" can enjoy some small victories over the Australian environment: the drover's wife takes a break from reminiscing to laugh at herself when she perceives the

ludicrousness of her attachment to “civilized” life in the form of a few tattered fashion magazines. By contrast, in the stories of Barbara Baynton (1857-1929) there is no comic relief for women in the bush: adversities succeed one another only to lead them to bitter defeat in the end. Baynton wrote a novel, *Human Toll* (1903), but her reputation rests mainly on *Bush Studies* (1902), a small volume of six well-crafted narratives that can best be described as horror bush tales.

The environment plays an important part in creating the terrifying atmosphere in Baynton’s fiction, causing her protagonists (in four of the stories they are female) to feel lost and abandoned. A. A. Phillips sees in the stories,

a sense of spiritual darkness emanating from the land itself, a feeling of primeval cruelty fed by the sunlight which glares instead of glowing, by the sombre grey of the bush which some obstinate Europeanism within us insists should be green, by the brown weight of the plains, by the harshness of man’s struggle against nature. (20)

In the nightmarish “A Dreamer”, nature itself seems to be the misogynous element, but “Billy Skywonkie”, “Squeaker’s Mate” and “The Chosen Vessel” all have in common female protagonists that are abused, exploited, abandoned or even raped and murdered by ruthless bushmen. While Lawson has a deterministic approach to the Australian environment, implying that bush life must be stoically endured, for Baynton the victimisation of women is much more a product of society than a battle against nature. According to Kay Schaffer, far from being merely descriptive of the adverse conditions faced by women, Baynton’s narratives imply that women are “appropriated to positions of inferiority within the discourses of religion, politics and mythology; and sacrificed through [the dispersement of these discourses] to the dominant symbolic order”(149).

Baynton was mostly ignored by contemporary Australians. Only one of her stories, “The Tramp”, was accepted for local publication in 1986, in the *Bulletin Magazine*, and that only after substantial editing (even the original title “The Chosen Vessel” was changed).

Bush Studies and *Human Toll* were both published in England and attracted some attention on account of the unusualness of the themes and the grotesque details involving colonial life. It was not until 1965, though, that an essay by A. A. Phillips called attention to the quality of Baynton’s writing, and she came to be admitted as part of the Australian tradition, in spite of her unorthodox views of the bush and its people.

For Schaffer, irony is a weapon used by Baynton against the very discourse that allowed her to be part of the “legend” in the first place (Schaffer 149-150). “Squeaker’s Mate” is a good measure of Baynton’s mastery of literary irony. The story is built on the reversion of the stereotypical male/female roles. By making a direct reference to the ideal of mateship—and challenging it—it works as an ironic counterpoint to so many of the stories that compose the Australian bush canon. The main question raised by Baynton in this “bush study” is: “What could happen to a woman if she—denying the “constraints” of her anatomy and the place of “the angel in the house”—set out to do the physical work usually performed by the toughest of men?” “Squeaker’s Mate” proposes a gloomy answer to that question.

Irony is already present in the title, as it becomes clear from the outset that Squeaker’s mate is a woman. As the drover’s wife, Squeaker’s mate is not referred to by her name (in fact, her name, Mary, is only mentioned once in the last paragraph of the story), but in terms of her standing in relation to a man. In fact, much more than an “appendage” (Barret 87) – in semiotic terms the recurrent ‘s’ along the text is significant – or a fragile and dependent wife, she is far superior to Squeaker, both in moral and physical aspects. The husband’s unflattering nickname is a fitting allusion to his weak and idle personality, as much as to his low intellect and physical appearance.

The mates’ inverted gender roles are developed in the first paragraphs of the story. The opening lines already highlight the woman’s height and physical “equability” (Baynton 13) and describe her leading the way to a routinely chore, the felling of a tree. She is carrying the heavy tools—axe, maul and wedges—, while the man takes the cookware—the typically Australian billy can (type of pan used as a kettle) and tucker (food)

bags. As the story unfolds, other of her “manly” features become evident: she has a strong and independent will, an aptitude for mathematics, visual acuity and she speaks little. Among the men in the community, Squeaker is often referred to as “‘a nole woman,’ [...] after man’s fashion to eliminate all virtue” (17) while his wife is considered “the best long-haired mate that ever stepped in petticoats.” (13). Local men are, thus, impressed by Mary not in terms of her “feminine” attributes, but either in a mock or in a “business” way, as she “had hard-grafted with the best of them for every acre and hoof on that selection” (17).

In this story, going against the bulk of traditional bush tales, the selection has been bought with Mary’s money (although she allows the contract to be signed by her husband). Squeaker also takes maximum advantage of his wife’s industriousness. She’s the one who, aside from her domestic chores, looks after the sheep, puts up and repairs fences, goes to town on errands, collects and sell bush honey and so on. Indeed, she has what it would take to be a true bush heroine, if the same standards applied to male heroes in the Australian tradition could be transferred to female characters. A heavy drinker, Squeaker needs to be coaxed into doing any work at all and his response to that is often abusive. How Mary puts up with it is “among the mysteries” (17) to the other men. Rather than attracting female sympathy, Mary’s lack of “leisure for yarning” and, being childless, “uncompromising independence” (17), make her not only unpopular, but a menace to the other wives, who forbid their husbands to have any kind of relationship with her.

Inhabiting this ambiguous location in-between the pre-established gender roles, Squeaker’s mate suffers from loneliness, prejudice and misogyny much above the usual levels for fictional bushwomen. Baynton makes Mary’s situation much more complex by, early in the story, compromising her body, thus immersing her even more deeply in alterity. An accident during the felling of the tree leaves the woman paralysed: she is injured by the breaking of a worm-infested branch. This can be seen as Australian nature exerting its traditional antagonistic role in creating either heroes or victims. But still more intimidating is the immediate human

response to the accident. Through free indirect speech and graphic detail, Baynton’s narrative voice makes the most of Squeaker’s insensitivity to his mate’s ordeal:

The pipe had fallen from her lips; there was blood on the stem.

“Did yer jam yer tongue?” he asked.

She always ignored trifles, he knew, therefore he passed her silence.

He told her that her dress was on fire. She took no heed. He put it out, and looked at the burnt arm, then with intentness at her. Her eyes were turned unblinkingly to the heavens, her lips were grimly apart, and a strange greyness was upon her face, and the sweat-beads were mixing. [...]

In a heavy way he wondered why did she sweat, when she was not working? Why did she not keep the flies out of her mouth and eyes? She’d have bungy eyes, if she didn’t. If she was asleep, why did she not close them? (15)

Male and female bodies, to return to De Beauvoir’s arguments, far from signifying exclusively gender or sexuality, also point to power and dominance. In Australia, Wendy Seymour observes, there is a predominant type of physical body image attached to manhood: an anatomical structure that, to some extent, has historical roots and is derived from the actual harshness of colonial environment, but that is also a construction of the 1950s, on looking back to the past in search of a national legend for Australia. That would be a “strong, tough, resilient body which could endure heat and deprivation yet be ready to respond to the unpredictabilities of rural life”, articulated, as well, to the body image of mateship, in “the hard, strong, emotionless, give-go man working alongside other men in the ‘egalitarian’ context of the bush. In such male culture, inhabited by strong men, as well as in accordance with nineteenth century dichotomous thought, Seymour goes on, women’s bodies would be “weak and fallible”, as well as “interior, private and mysterious”; i.e., there would be an essentialist complementarity between the male and female bodies that suited the maintenance of the status quo (67-68).

Submitted to an extreme instance of the “unpredictability of rural life” and despite her best efforts

to get up and moving again, Squeaker's mate's body does not pass the resilience test and goes from one extreme of the physical ability spectrum to the other. In the second moment of the story—the aftermath of the accident—Mary is committed to bed, having lost the movement of her legs altogether and, thus, the ability to work and to be a “mate”, even in parodic terms. As Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson put it, “[h]er previous strength confounded the difference of her sex, but even she finds that once strength is broken, anatomy is destiny” (14).

No longer in control of her body, and, most importantly, no longer productive, “the cripple” is moved to a shed next to the house and substituted by a “new mate”, a barmaid Squeaker brings one day from town. Baynton's use of free indirect speech again proves skillful, as the narrator probes into the women's appraisal of each other. The new mate is intimidated by the old one: “The cripple's silence told on the stranger, especially when alone. She would rather have abuse. [...] She was afraid of ‘her’, and after the first day would not go within reach.” (23) The back-broken woman, on the other hand, is deeply hurt in her pride: “Ah! ah! bitterest of all bitterness to women—[the new mate] was younger. The thick hair that fell from the brow of the woman on the bunk was white now.” (22). The newly arrived was also pregnant, another bitter reminder of the failure of Mary's anatomy/destiny.

Back-broken, white-haired, barren, isolated, Mary is now part of a perverse “love” triangle and subjected to even further humiliation by having to watch, in voyeuristic angry silence, from the cracks on the walls of the shed, the comings and goings of her rival in her own house. Anger is what is left from Mary's former admirable fittingness for bush life. This overwhelming feeling leads to the psychologic tension and explicit violence of the ending of “Squeaker's Mate”, elements also present in the other stories of the volume. That certainly contributed for her earlier critics, such as A. G. Stephens, the editor of the *Bulletin Magazine*, to consider Baynton “too outspoken for an Australian audience” (Stephens apud Schaffer 154).

At a time when women writers in general did not leave the comfort zone of romance, and most of the Australian legend enthusiasts favoured patriotic

themes, Barbara Baynton wrote what can be considered anti-romance (Goldsworthy 105), exposing, in graphic detail, the disagreeable facts of domestic abuse and hatred against women, as well as the exploitation of women's labour power and bodies in the Australian backlands. What she was doing in the fictional realm—although inadvertently or privately, as there are no records of her involvement in any sort of gender-related activism—can be compared to what first-wave feminists, such as her contemporary Louisa Lawson², were trying to accomplish in political and social spheres. By bringing up unwelcome/unpatriotic topics, Baynton was acknowledging and denouncing the absence of women from Australian history, in the De Beauvoir sense pointed out at the beginning of this paper.

In Squeaker's mate's world, comradeship, loyalty and cooperation are a sad parody, an impossibility between men and women, or even among women, either in times of fortune or adversity. What prevails in “Squeaker's Mate” can best be described as “anti-mateship.” Baynton's story is, ultimately, an exposure of the distortion of the mateship ideal more than half of a century before this theme started to receive more consistent critical attention.

In 1976, historian Miriam Dixson published *The Real Matilda*, exploring the causes of what she found to be the lower status of women in Australia when compared to other western countries. Dixson was one of the most resonant voices to challenge the adoption of mateship as a national value, on the grounds that it excluded women, but also because of its misogynist character. Dixson observed in 1970s Australia a social trend in which women

try and be what I define as a ‘matey woman’, ‘one of the boys’. Notwithstanding these valiant efforts, there is some gut sense in which a woman is not wanted. Back off, don't crowd me, love. You aren't really necessary. You aren't really there. (81)

Rejection is the reaction to Baynton's 1890s “matey woman”, in the same way as the “matey women” in the 1970s were, in Dixson's view, still discredited and ignored. In today's highly urban, multicultural and

diversified Australia, a country concerned with practices such as equality, inclusion and affirmative action, being a “matey woman” should not constitute such a taboo as in Dixon’s or Baynton’s time. However, “mateship” remains a problem to be solved, as women continue to be excluded from its scope. As Jim Page puts it, Australian men have “mates”; women have “friends” (195). By questioning the validity of mateship as an Australian value more than a century ago, Barbara Baynton was setting the background for discussions that are still valid for contemporary Australian gender studies.

Notes

1. A swagman offered to do some work in return for food and accommodation on a farm; a sundowner arrived at sundown and in the morning was already gone, failing to provide the labour counterpart to the deal.
2. One of Australia’s first feminists, Louisa Lawson (who happened to be Henry Lawson’s mother), had written, in 1889, an article published in English and American women’s magazines titled “The Australian Bush-Woman”, depicting the harsh conditions faced by Australian women in rural regions.

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