

Nineteenth Century Humorists

In the United States and Australia

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During the nineteenth century the United States and Australia were similar in two respects: both were relatively new English-speaking entities on the world scene; both experienced gold rushes at about the same time. Dialect in Australia tended to be more uniform than in the U.S. where speech could vary by region, by country of origin, by race, or by profession. In many cases, writers in both countries found humor in quirks of speech.

This paper explores how Australian and American humorists compared in their use of the gold rush and of various dialects. The Australians are Henry Lawson, Andrew Barton (Banjo) Patterson and Edward Dyson. The Americans

are Bret Harte, Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) and Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne). Ward differs from all the other humorists here, in that instead of reveling in humor involving gold or gold miners, he took his humor TO the miners working in the American west, primarily California. His work will provide a finale for this paper.

Gold Rush Humor

Gold rush humor in both countries came from the communities that grew up around the gold fields where miners congregated. The gold rush was more limited in the US than in Australia. In the US, gold was found primarily in California and Nevada in 1848 and 49. In Australia gold was found first in New South Wales and Victoria and subsequently in almost every other region of the country.

Once gold was discovered, corporations came in to excavate the gold. They hired men to dig the mines and build the mills to refine the gold. Towns grew up around the mills and miners congregated there at night.

For stories with a gold mine setting, those of Australian Henry Lawson and American Brett Harte are most comparable. The antics of Lawson's miners are described in the "The Loaded Dog"¹ and "The Golden Graveyard,"² of

Harte's in "The Luck of Roaring Camp"³. But there are major differences.

Lawson's "The Golden Graveyard" ends with Dave Ryan and his mates being pursued by a drunken, irate woman with a pitchfork. She's the widow of a man whose grave they have been desecrating because it was on top of a vein of gold.

In Paterson's "The Swagman's Rest"⁴, the swagman's mates are told exactly where to bury him, and then advised if ever they are "stuck", they should dig him up. Of course, in time they did, and there not far under his casket was a vein of yellow gold.

The all male population in Harte's gold mine story "The Luck of Roaring Camp" is called an "assemblage of roughs." A prostitute dies within their midst giving birth to a son. The roughs decided to adopt the baby as their own and then scrambled to create an environment they deem suitable. The scrambling is described in much detail, but the baby is finally drowned in the river.

Many of Harte's gold rush stories are tinged with sadness. His group of "outcasts" from Poker Flat is humorously or sardonically presented, but in the end all succumb to a snowstorm. Lawson's story ends in hilarity; Harte's stories often end in death.

In Lawson's *The Loaded Dog*, it was sometimes the practice of miners at Stony Creek, in their quest for gold, to blast the rock with a cartridge made of blasting powder and a time fuse. The men were fond of fish and a nearby creek was not yielding sufficient quantity. They decided to blast fish out of the creek and prepared a bomb to do the job—a bomb almost three times the size as the one which they used to extract gold from rock. However, they had not considered the venturesome nature of their camp dog, a retriever who would retrieve anything. The dog found the cartridge, brushed it past the open fire that lit the fuse and proceeded to pursue the fleeing men.

Finally, the retriever was forced to concede his burden to a “nasty yellow mutt”, who was then blown to bits. All the residents of Stony Creek collapsed in laughter.

The Australian Edward Dyson is also cheerful in describing the mining milieu. In his work it is often the gold mill, not the miners, that is described. In his poem “The Tin-Pot Mill”⁵, he describes the old gold mill as a “spavined coffee grinder. It jiggles like an agitated cripple with St. Vitus Dance intensified by beer.”

In general, Dyson dealt more with the remnants of old mining towns. His father worked as a miner and a mining engineer. Speaking of his childhood, Dyson says, “The

deserted mines took hold of me, and I haunted them like a familiar spirit.”

It is in “A Golden Shanty”⁶ that he depicts the remains of an old mining town, one inhabited by Michael Doyle and by a “colony of squalid, gibberish Chinese fossickers.” Doyle is owner of the Shamrock Hotel, a ramshackle establishment, built of “sun-dried bricks of a bilious tint.”

Relations between Doyle and his Chinese neighbors were strained at first. But then almost overnight, the Chinese sought Doyle’s friendship.

It was not long before Doyle noted that his visitors were carting off random bricks from around his establishment. When his Chinese neighbors eventually approached with an offer to buy his establishment, he was secretly delighted and finagled to get what he felt was an extravagant price. Luckily for him, before the sale became final, he broke one of his house bricks to discover a nugget of gold. The sale was off and Doyle became a millionaire.

It is interesting that even a lazy, no good lout like Doyle was not allowed to be outwitted by the Chinese. This seems to speak to the pervasive prejudice against the Chinese. The same prejudice prevailed in much of the U.S. as well.

“Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”⁷ deals with the duplicity of American miners. It is the story of a miner, one Jim Smiley, who would bet on anything “that turned up if he could get anybody to try to make money on the other side.” Smiley educated a frog to to jump and won a lot of money pitting that frog against any and all who ventured to pit a frog against him. But one day a man said he would bet but needed a frog. Smiley ran off to find one and the man picked up his frog and poured shot down his throat. Smiley was shocked when his frog lost the race. He didn’t discover the reason until long after the man was gone. This duplicity is very different from the matesmanship of the Australians. As the narrator, Smiley’s accent is clearly early Western American. Mark Twain’s gold rush story is very different.

The “Celebrated Frog” launched Twain on his career. Ward was an ardent fan of Twain and it was his doing that the frog story was originally published.

DIALECT

In dialect usage, the only similarity between Americans and Australians is that both employed it. There the similarity ends. Among Australians usage was a consistent element of

humor and the humorists were creative in devising it. But among the U.S. humorists dialect was a matter of contention.

Paterson's "Waltzing Matilda"⁸ is perhaps the best known example of Australian dialect. It has been referred to as the unofficial national anthem of Australia, and by title, at least, it well known throughout the English-speaking world. However, it is doubtful that many non-Australians know that in Paterson's original poem, "Waltzing Matilda" does not mean dancing gracefully with a woman named Matilda. It means roaming the "outback" with your bedroll. And a "billabong" is a river bend, a "jumbuck" is a sheep and a "billy" is a can for boiling water. Paterson's use of dialect brought forth no criticism from his fellow humorists.

At that time Paterson and Lawson were both writing short pieces for the Australian newspaper, *The Bulletin*. Paterson often wrote in admiration of the "bushmen". Lawson believed that admiration was unwarranted. Their contention was followed with great interest: so much so, that they decided to carry on the battle as long as interest persisted. The public interest outlasted their own. And so we have different type of Australian "matesmanship."⁹

Among American humorists dialect usage was a matter of bitter contention. Harte was critical of Artemus Ward, saying "the form of his spelling was purely mechanical." British acclaim for Ward must have particularly galling for Harte,

because he dismisses it by calling it the “condescending patronage” of the Brits.

Of the American humorists, Charles Farrah Browne, alias Artemus Ward¹⁰, made the most prodigious use of dialect. He must have been a very smart man. He began his career as a printer at the age of 13. By 1858 at 24 he was editor of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. It was at this time that he created the character, Artemus Ward, the name by which he became known. In 1860 he abandoned his career as a journalist and began touring the country as Artemus Ward. He didn't work with the miners or describe the miners, he entertained the miners, traveling west with a skit entitled “Highhanded Outrage at Utica.”¹⁰

Examining this skit today it is hard to imagine how it could have held audiences spellbound for an hour and a half, as Ward's biographer claims. Nonetheless, Ward's chief claim to fame is that he was Abraham Lincoln's favorite comic. And the anecdote concerning his work most frequently cited is this:

During the Civil War, Lincoln began a meeting of his cabinet by reading “Highhanded Outrage at Utica.”¹⁰ He went on to read two more short pieces of Ward's, making the cabinet members very restless indeed. At this point Lincoln said to them, “Gentlemen, why don't you laugh? With the fearful strain that is on me night and day, if I did not laugh, I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do.”¹¹ He

then pulled from his pocket and proceeded to read the Emancipation Proclamation.

Footnotes

1. Lawson, Henry. "The Loaded Dog" in *Joe Wilson and His Mates*, pp. 183-193. William Blackwood and Sons. Edinburgh and London 1981.
2. Lawson, Henry. "The Golden Graveyard" in *Joe Wilson and His Mates*. pg. 157-174. William Blackwood and Sons. Edinburgh and London. 1981.
3. Harte, Bret. "The Luck of Roaring Camp" in *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Tales*. Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company. The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1906, pg. 1-14.
4. Paterson, Andrew Barton (Banjo). "The Swagman's Rest," in *The Works of Banjo Paterson*. Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2009, pg. 92-94.
5. Dyson, Edward. "The Tin Pot Mill" in *Rhymes from the Mines and Other Lines* pg. 94-97. Angus and Robertson, 1896.
6. Dyson, Edward. "A Golden Shanty" in *Rhymes from the Mines and Other Lines* pg. 157-176. Angus and Robertson, 1896.
7. Clemens, Samuel, alias Mark Twain and Strothman, F. (illustrator). *The Jumping Frog in English, Then in French, Then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More By Patient Umremunerated Toil*. (McMill, ed.) New York and London:Harper & Brothers, publisher, 1903, pp. 64-66.

8. Paterson, Andrew Barton(Banjo). *Waltzing Matilda. A poem*. 3rd ed. Sydney, Collins, 1971, c1970.
9. “Bulletin Debate.” Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulletin_Debate Accessed 6/28/2018.
10. Ward, Artemus. “High-Handed Outrage at Utica” in *The Complete Works of Artemus Ward*. Melville D. Landon, New York: 1875, p.34.
11. Martin, Justin. *Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America’s First Bohemians*. Da Capo Press, 2014, p. 204-205.

