

Two letters from Will Lawson

Desmond Hurley

During strengthening of the historic Turnbull House in Wellington, carried out by the Department of Conservation between April and July of 1995, it became necessary to place in storage the library of the Royal Philatelic Society of New Zealand. Subsequent unpacking of the numerous cartons of books and journals brought to light a battered thick brown folder labelled 'South Pacific Islands—Pamphlets, Cuttings, Original Letters and Articles etc.' The folder carried the signatures of the late Pat Lawlor¹ and A. R. Burge² and, in a different hand, 'ex Pat Lawlor'. From this I deduce that the folder was given to Dick Burge by Lawlor or had come into his hands from the Lawlor estate and that Burge used it as background for his various publications on the postal histories of a number of Pacific Islands.

Apart from a copy of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* for September 1954, some pamphlets, and an assorted collection of newspaper and magazine cuttings, the folder contained an edited carbon copy of a seven-page diary (without, however, any indication of the year) of a voyage via San Francisco and Los Angeles on the Matson liner Mariposa by Pat Lawlor and his wife, entitled *South Pacific Magic : Diary of New Zealand Author who made the "Round Trip"*. There was also a 3-page article on Samoa by Lawlor, *The First Polynesian State: Some Sidelights* and a note entitled *A Bibliographic Problem* by S.G. August which was apparently intended for publication in the *Aussie* for December 15, 1928.³ This deals with a translation from the French of a book entitled 'Cast Away on the Auckland Islands', purporting to be written by a French sailor and which August (? Lawlor) surmised was a French rewrite of *Wrecked on a Reef, or Twenty Months on the Auckland Islands* based on Thomas Musgrave's journal and published by Nelson and Sons of London in 1880.⁴

However, the real finds in the folder were two typewritten letters to Lawlor in their original envelopes postmarked Crow's Nest, N.S.W. from Will Lawson. Both envelopes have handwritten notations 'From Will Lawson, Re Auckland Islands'.

Will Lawson (1876-1957) was English-born but his family emigrated to New Zealand in 1880 where they lived in Dunedin, Timaru and

Christchurch before going to Queensland in 1884 while he was still a child. He returned to Wellington in 1892 where he worked as an insurance clerk (and, it is said, painted the fence around Parliament Buildings) before going to Sydney in 1912.

Lawson edited the publication *Australian Bush Songs and Ballads* (1944), published several volumes of poetry and wrote a number of novels including *When Cobb & Co was King* (1936), as well as historical and travel books. Although he assisted Bertha Lawson with the publication of her reminiscences of her husband, Henry Lawson, Will Lawson was no relation of the more famous Australian author.

Pat Lawlor referred to Will as ‘the restless poet of Australasia. If he is not leaving or joining the staff of a newspaper, he is embarking or disembarking, on or from, the Sydney boat. In fact, he moves so quickly from one place to another that I have heard him credited with the supernatural gift of omnipresence....You can’t help liking the fellow. If Will is in one of his winning moods he can, if necessary, sell superphosphates to a bishop.’ (Confessions 221)

The Council of the Royal Philatelic Society of New Zealand have donated the folder and letters to the Alexander Turnbull Library.⁵

14a Martin-place
Sydney

October 17

Dear Patrick,

How are you? Looka here, I want some dope on the Auckland islands and the Enderbys who built a town there in 1850. Also a copy of *New Zealand Pilot*, a Govt publication, now out of print I fear.

If you ever are in Dunedin and have time, the Early Settlers Association near Railway Station might have something.

Printers strike is holding up books. Did you see B.’s review of “Lady of the Heather”? and did you get a copy. Guess I’d better post you one. What the hell did B. mean? Anyway it’s selling like blazes, only trouble only 500 were printed. I’m doing another Murray river book, “Top-end Boats” and then hope to get a subsidy from Literary Fund to write “Bitter Glory” the story of the Aucklands and Enderby’s

If I do I’ll come over to get dope myself. I hear Haines called on the missus and showed her ‘Forbidden Gold’. He’s sold 2000 copies so she’ll be in funds. Glad of it.

I went down to Echuca on the Murray—don't tell the missus—to get river colour and had a good change as well as profitable for writing. Can write easier and better now than ever I did.

How's the verses going? Hope you weren't offended at my frank comments. You can do it, Pat.

Cheerio

Will L

49 Baroona-road

Northbridge, N.S.W.

February 18, 1951

Dear Pat,

Your letter to hand enclosing order for the books which I will send on tomorrow. I enclose another letter from Darcy Niland. Incidentally I have explained to him, re "Old Bob's Birds" that I did it because Dymocks had the darn thing before for months and knocked it back, so did A. and R. on the grounds that it was not authentic, whereas Thompson who knows dam' little about animals, has won a name nevertheless. I did'd [sic] want the old hut – which has now been pulled down in the name of Progress, to go unsung, and the money will be handy. The world is full of Thompson fakes, "the want to writes who cant" as Henry said. Never mind, Pat.

I'm getting Eric to send his copy of "Baa' aa' to Darcy and he will show it to "Newsview". I reckon it will liven up interest in Mary Smith, wont it?

I've just started a campaign to get "Old Man Murray" republished by Harraps. When I was in Echuca last, Ion Idriess passed through and was shown some new records of the rivers which came to light one day when the floor if [sic] a loft over a warehouse collapsed, and down fell a ton of papers. A schoolmaster named Morris has them to look after on behalf of Echuca. I tackled Ion about it and he of course disclaimed all intention of writing a river book.

However, I've explained to Harraps and they are interested , especially and in 1942 , when my three books were selling well – Cobb, Rivers and Ben Boyd – they were due to be reprinted, But by bribery Hutchinsons got an other [? order] for 12 tons of paper and offer Catts such good terms that he dumped me and did a 10,000 issue of a British novel – not the old man but Fred the son. Since then O.M.M. and Ben have never been reprinted. But I spent some time re-writing them in parts and money in getting them typed, so they may come good now.

Do you think Reed's would be interested in "Where the Aucklands Lie?" Remember I sent M.S. to you and you sent it to Otago Uni, where there was a chap who had been there. I would like to get it out, too.

Thanks for everything, Pat. The par is good, the pull of the jacket is not ready – it takes a month to make the jacket blocks. You'll get and dope [sic] when ready. I think that's all at the moment. Good luck, old man. Let me have Darcy's letter back some time.⁶

Will L.

WORKS CITED

Lawlor, P. A. *Confessions of a Journalist*. Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1935.

ENDNOTES

¹ Wellington journalist and author and self-confessed 'bookman' (1893-1979); see *Confessions of a Journalist*; *Old Wellington Days*, *The House of Templemore*, etc.

² A.R. Burge (1913 - 1992), editor of *The Early Cook Islands Post Office* (1978); *The Postage Stamps of New Zealand*, vol. 5 (1967); *A Postal History of the Samoan Islands* (1987; 1989), etc.

³ I was unable to find this in this or other issues of the *Aussie*.

⁴ Lawlor got it wrong; F.E. Raynal's *Les Naufragés ou Vingt Mois sur un Récif des Iles Auckland* was published in Paris in 1870; the English translation in London in 1874.

⁵ Royal Philatelic Society of NZ Papers (1890-1972) MS-Group-6023).

⁶ This letter is not included and was presumably returned as requested.

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