



**Wayne  
Marshall**

Reading group notes

‘a genre-  
defying  
wonder of  
a novel’  
**Ryan  
O’Neill**

# HENRY GOES BUSH

‘like  
nothing  
you’ve  
read  
before’  
**Michael  
Winkler**



# Plot Summary

## **The price of genius is one hell of a hangover.**

In 1892, New South Wales' most promising writer and least promising teetotaler, Henry Lawson, is banished to Bourke to 'find the real bush'. The goal: sober up, gather fresh material, and stop being such a disappointment. But what Australia's favourite literary son discovers in the river town is less a glorious national frontier than a collective nervous breakdown.

History records this as the trip that defined his career.

Wayne Marshall records it as a surrealist action movie where Lawson must outrun his own myth and a gunslinger known as The Rider, aka Banjo – a poet significantly better at being a legend than Henry is.

*Henry Goes Bush* confronts the madness that lies behind our colonial dreaming – a moment where history is a hallucination and 'the bush' a phantasmagoric theme park. A reality in which *The Bulletin's* famed poetry wars are an actual shootout on the banks of the Darling River.

## **It turns out finding 'the real Australia' is easy; the hard part is surviving the encounter.**

# About Wayne Marshall

Wayne Marshall is an Australian writer and musician. His stories have appeared in *Overland*, *Island*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Going Down Swinging*, and other places. He is the author of the short story collection *Shirl*, which was shortlisted for a Victorian Premier's Literary Award. He is the co-founder of the Peter Carey Short Story Award and lives in regional Victoria. *Henry Goes Bush* is his first novel.

# Characters

## Henry Lawson

1. What makes Henry Lawson a good protagonist? Why do you think the author chose Henry as the main character, as opposed to Banjo Paterson?
2. The photographer, Meyer, tells Henry that he reminds him of his son, Dieter. Meyer says on page 125–26: 'He was looking so desperately for his place. It wasn't among the people here in Bourke: he found that out soon enough.' What parallels can you draw between this description of Dieter and Henry?
3. Throughout the novel, Henry's change of clothing comes to resemble costume changes in a theatrical sense. To what extent might these changes fit with his desire to find in Bourke 'a skin that finally fits' (p. 103)?
4. "I went bush. And it changed me." (p. 318)  
In what way did Henry's trip to the bush change him? How does this depiction compete with other myths about Henry Lawson?
5. What role does Henry's alcoholism play in the novel? Why does it matter that he hasn't had a drink 'in over two months' (p. 318) during his stint in the bush?

## Banjo Paterson

1. In another iteration of Bourke, Banjo Paterson is referred to as The Rider. Why do you think this is? What point does this make about Banjo?

2. *Banjo was wrong, I was right. The bush is hell.* (p. 4).

Banjo doesn't share the same negative opinion about the bush that Henry does. What message is the novel trying to send here? Do you think Banjo felt more pressure to uphold national values?

3. *But what excites The Rider most is its symbolic weight, the story beneath the story.* (p. 231).

There is a scene in the novel where Paterson conceives his famed poem, 'Waltzing Matilda', while imagining Lawson as the 'jolly swagman'. In reality, there are many differing accounts of how this poem came to be. What do you make of *this* version? What can we gather from this about Paterson and Lawson's relationship? Consider their friendly rivalry through verse.

4. At one point, Banjo sees one of the tunnels disappear and in its place is a 'void . . . not an earthen hole – just a gulf of infinite darkness' (p. 206). Compare this with how Henry sees the tunnels. Is this meant to be a reflection of Banjo's perception?

## Setting

### Bourke/The Bush

1. *'The bush – it'll eat the boy alive.'* (p. 12)

How does Bourke, or the Bush, take on a personality of its own, and what does this mean in the overall context of the novel? What is being said about the bush as a cornerstone of Australian myth?

2. *'The town is a living thing ... Living, feeding, expanding. But feeding on what? And expanding to where?'* (p. 244).

What point is the author making here about Bourke, and history more broadly? To what extent could history be said to be a 'living thing'?

3. Early in the story, Henry views the bush as a 'symphony of unfamiliar sounds' with 'its labyrinthine destiny', 'its endless codes and symbols he has no hope of comprehending' (p. 42–3). What might the book be saying here about the differences between a white settler experience of the bush versus that of First Nations peoples?

4. *Perhaps ... like the escaped convict William Buckley is said to have done before him down south, Lawson might step towards the smoke, abandoning his world for those to whom the bush has been provider, care-giver and cathedral for many thousands of years before the British arrived and planted their stories in the dirt* (p. 42).

Is there any connection between these 'stories in the dirt' and the proliferation of the tunnels? If so, what might it be saying about the role of stories and storytelling in acts of colonial expansionism?

5. Compare the way Henry views the bush with how he views Sydney. Is one better than the other? Why/why not?
6. Banjo's comrade Sissy is a woman out of time. Discuss her modern characteristics and how this is amplified by the history setting.

## Alternative timelines

1. The choice to tell Henry's story through parallel universes is unique. Why do you think the author chose this? How does it critique the very nature of history?
2. How do the many Bourkes affect our understanding of the town? What might Sissy's 'chunk of Swiss cheese' comment (p. 245) be referring to?
3. The tunnels beneath Bourke are smooth-looking and vividly coloured. Is there any significance to this?
4. There are many depictions of Henry and Bourke. What do the differences and similarities between each iteration say about the nature of history and storytelling?
5. What is your favourite version of Bourke? What is it about that version that sings to you?

## Historical accounts


1. The novel touches on the differing accounts that exist of Henry Lawson and other bush poets. For example, Henry was said to have been born during 'biblical kind of rain' (p. 62), but in fact, there was 'no evidence of any storms or floods that night' (p. 63). This is just one instance of competing accounts. Why are these differing accounts included?
2. The author pits Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson against each other in the Battle for the Bush, a literal shootout on the banks of the Darling River. What might this be saying about Australian nationalism and colonial myth-making?
3. If you had a choice of any two writers from history to pit against each other in a humourous showdown like the one in this novel, who would it be?
4. *The depth of emotional connection between them (Henry and Jim), their shows of physical affection, led the writer Frank Moorhouse to speculate whether their relationship was more than platonic.* (p. 81).

A romantic relationship between Henry and Jim is implied. What might this, and Henry's relationship with Banjo, say about how society views friendship between men? Can it only be rivals or lovers, or might there be space for something in between?

5. Historically, Jim Grahame's poetry did not achieve the same recognition as Lawson or Paterson. What might be attractive about a poet like Lawson or Paterson to the Australian public?

## National myths

1. *'... I'm at the centre of a story I don't want to be in. The True Spirit, the Battle for the Bush, and all the other excessively patriotic rubbish'* (p. 294).  
Henry's poetry was used as a patriotic tool to create Australia's national myth. What are the elements of this myth? What defines Australia?
2. Does the account of the 'Bush' in this novel match your depiction of the Australian Bush? Has the depiction changed over the years? If so, how?
3. Jim tells Henry that his story, 'The Drover's Wife', 'captured the trials and isolation of the bush' more poetically than any other (p. 45). This would've been published before Henry went bush. What might this be saying about how the public view stories about the bush, even if the writer hasn't experienced it? What does this say for the publishing landscape of the time?

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4. *And he wondered, not for the first time, but with the full force of epiphany: if this was how he felt at the intrusion upon his beloved bush, how must it have been for those whose existences were inextricable from it when, on the waterways and between the gum trees and across the paddocks, the Europeans came?* (p. 227).

The author acknowledges the massive impacts of dispossession on First Nations people. What does this suggest about ways history is presented, and voices that have been silenced?

5. What is one national myth you wish to rewrite? And why?

## Poetry and writing

1. In storytelling, what does the medium of poetry offer?
2. *But the writer is something of a gun for hire in Sydney.* (p. 26).

What might this tell us about Henry's perception towards commercial writing?

3. On page 36, Henry says: *'Surely you can see the comic side of it? A magazine obsessed with curating a literature of the bush does so from a building in central Sydney. You don't find that a bit ridiculous?'*

What is Henry saying here about how bush poets approached their writing/how publishers view the Bush in writing? Do you think this is fair comment?

4. What is it about poetry that makes the bush so alluring? Why do you think publishers and news outlets at the time were so interested in poetry?
5. Consider one bush poem from either Henry Lawson or Banjo Paterson. Do you view it differently after reading the novel? What insight have you gained? Keep in mind that both their stories have competing historical accounts.