

## BLIND LARRY: THE JEWISH ACTOR AS HABITUAL CRIMINAL

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**J**ames Lawrence, otherwise known as Blind Larry, was Jewish, and a criminal. Thief, forger, pickpocket, swindler, card-sharp, he occasionally descended to robbery with violence. Transported to Australia for one of his many English crimes, he continued his criminal ways in New South Wales and as a result served time in most of the leading prison establishments of the colony—Newcastle, Emu Plains, Port Macquarie, Moreton Bay and Norfolk Island. When he died it was in another prison, the Collingwood Stockade in Victoria.

Apart from the extravagance of his criminal record, and his Jewish faith, two things lend interest to Lawrence's career. One is that he was (at least nominally) a professional actor, one of the earliest recorded as such in the convict indents. The second is that he left an autobiography. It has never been published, and is to be found in the Mitchell Library.<sup>1</sup> Like several other convict autobiographies that have survived, Lawrence's was written on Norfolk Island during the administration of Alexander Maconochie, the radical prison reformer. Maconochie was an enthusiast who overflowed with ideas for the redemption of criminals, and he could well have encouraged his charges to write their life stories as an act of therapeutic self-reflection. Certainly, Lawrence's autobiography seems to have been intended for Maconochie's eyes, to judge by the way it ends on a note of mildly sickening flattery: 'Then[came]an Angell and Family the well known and Respected Capt Machoni[chie] Humane, Kind, Religious, and Justice stares us in the face the Almighty had now sent us a Deliverer.'<sup>2</sup>

Any account of Lawrence is bound to be dominated by this autobiography, but as a document it has problems. Quite apart from its crude handwriting (which may not be Lawrence's own) it is characterised by chaotic grammar, wayward punctuation and, occasionally, by erratic spelling. In addition there is Lawrence's frequent use of colloquialism and thieves' slang, which creates its

own difficulties for the uninitiated: 'I was compelled to Screw a Place by the Way of a Joke—and extract Property to the amount of Eighty three Pounds on the Cross, of drapery. No Down'.<sup>3</sup> Much of the work is written in a flat matter-of-fact style leavened with touches of sardonic humour, but occasionally it veers into the florid (as in the reference to Maconochie) while, on the other hand, there are passages which are left in staccato note form.

Beyond these formal problems there are issues relating to the author's perspective on his life, and to his value system (if any). On occasion Lawrence expresses a deep commitment to his identity as a Jew, nowhere more so than when awaiting execution in Calcutta.<sup>4</sup> He also writes of his commitment to family, as exemplified in his loyalty to his father and concern for the welfare of his mistress and then of his wife.<sup>5</sup> The trouble is that these beliefs appear to be free-standing, not part of any overall system of belief. For the most part he seems to live, disconcertingly, in a moral vacuum, which is accompanied by a complete lack of feeling for his victims, dupes such as the naive but amiable Mr Knox.<sup>6</sup> Even his gut loyalty to his Jewishness, and to the idea of family, are not always followed through in his actions. Lawrence may have been instrumental in gaining some official recognition of the religious needs of the Jewish convicts on Norfolk Island, but ultimately these fellow convicts were forced to expel him from their religious observances because of his 'irregular' and 'objectionable' behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, his commitment to family had limited practical consequences. He was the completely wayward son and a somewhat feckless husband, in spite of his professions of concern for his wife's welfare.<sup>8</sup> Like his mistress, his wife disappears from the story suddenly, without comment.

It has been argued that most convict autobiographies operate on conventional systems of right and wrong, focus on the horrors of transportation and are often vague about the crimes which led to imprisonment in the first place.<sup>9</sup> Lawrence's autobiography is not in this tradition. His accounts of time served on penal stations are, for the most part, curiously brief and at times throw-away. His emphasis is on the crimes committed, not on the suffering endured, and in treating of these crimes he is completely unapologetic. If he has a model it is not the moral tale but rogue literature and the picaresque, the racy narrative of the lives, tricks and adventures of criminals and others on the social margins.

But while there may be difficulties with Lawrence's style and with his viewpoint, the major problem with his autobiography is that of his accuracy. How reliable is his account and, if it contains inaccuracies, what is to be made of them?

An example of Lawrence's unreliability comes from an outside source. At some time after Lawrence had served his term at Moreton Bay (December 1826-August 1833) a worthy Queenslander, James John Knight, was collecting stories to reveal the savagery of the penal settlement there. Unfortunately he ran across Lawrence who gave him exactly what he wanted—tales of the savage treatment he received at Moreton Bay which left him blind in one eye and paralysed in one arm.<sup>10</sup> However, what the official records reveal is that Lawrence was blind or damaged in one eye by November 1819 at the latest, while a petition he wrote in advance of being sent to Moreton Bay reveals that at that stage his arm was already maimed—crushed by a timber wagon.<sup>11</sup> The other major difference between Knight's version and the autobiography is in tone. Knight's is the full 'horrors of transportation' treatment—near hysterical moral outrage. Lawrence's account of Moreton Bay makes grim reading, but is close to a controlled listing of facts, and even contains some lighter moments, such as Lawrence's concert for the officers. Did Lawrence provide the tone for Knight, knowing what he wanted, or is that Knight's own contribution?

Once doubts begin to creep in about Lawrence's truthfulness, other elements in his narrative become increasingly suspect: for example, there are criminal or theatrical incidents in the story that could have come straight from rogue literature or the closely related narratives of strolling actors. Thus, at some time in 1813 or early 1814, Lawrence tells a story of wandering the English countryside, coming across a doctor's house which is completely empty and with its door unlocked. He enters to plunder it and finds an urgent message from a nearby village requesting the doctor's help. As this story goes, Lawrence promptly impersonates the doctor, goes to the nearby village, pretends to effect a cure, and is amply rewarded for his care and attention.<sup>12</sup> The story stands out because it is given in much more detail than many of Lawrence's exploits and because it has the extravagance and implausibility of a picaresque tale. The unlocked house with nobody in it but with an urgent note on the desk, the initially pointless decision to impersonate the doctor—these are exactly the details one would expect to find in Alexander Smith's *Lives of the Highwaymen* or some similar compound of little fact and much fantasy. Viewed in this light there is a strong temptation to dismiss Lawrence's story as a fabrication.

Then, in the 'life of an actor' tradition, there is his account of his brief involvement with Sydney's first professional theatre. At the time, he says, he was being pursued for debts by numerous Sydney businessmen, so that he was afraid to appear on stage 'for fear of

my creditors pulling me off'. His first performance, of his favourite role, Don Caesar in *The Castle of Andalusia*, passed without incident, but at his second appearance, while he was singing the song 'Bound Prentice to a Waterman', he came to the line declaring the prentice would never run away. Upon this one of Lawrence's creditors in the audience cried out 'the scoundrel said he never run away but he ran away with four chests of tea and eight bags of sugar and never paid'.<sup>13</sup> The difficulty here is that an audience member taking an actor's line personally and shouting out a retort is a standard form of theatrical joke, and some examples turn on the actor's indebtedness to the audience member:

A provincial actress was performing the part of 'Lady Anne' in Richard the Third, and on delivering the following passage; 'when shall I have rest?' she was answered by her washer-woman from the pit, 'never till you pay me my three shillings and two-pence'.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps Lawrence's life did imitate art in this way. Or was it simply Lawrence appropriating a good story to enliven his narrative?

Lawrence is probably telling the truth when he says he was born in 1795, the son of a Jewish diamond broker in London. He finished school at age fourteen, although he does not seem to have benefited greatly from the experience, given the crudeness of his grammar and punctuation. At the same time he probably picked up some refinement from his apparently well-to-do family, and polished it further by his work as an actor. Generally speaking, actors were regarded as of low status (Lawrence's father hated him becoming involved with the trade) but the job of acting required a veneer of refinement for the playing of most roles and, on the basis of that, many actors could pass as pseudo-gentlemen. There is some evidence that once in the colony he was occasionally able to trade on this, at least until his bad behaviour destroyed his reputation. Thus, in the early 1820s, we shall see, he was appointed overseer of a prison gang in Sydney, a position that was often bestowed on socially superior convicts. Similarly, on his escape to Calcutta he claims to have made his way to the highest levels of society. There are also comments in the autobiography which suggest that he was rather a fancy dresser. He liked to look the gentleman.<sup>15</sup>

The first major challenge to Lawrence's veracity comes with his account of his adventures in America. Sent to Jamaica at 14 years of age as an apprentice book-keeper to his uncle, he left the island in June 1810 (he says) and travelled to South Carolina and Virginia. In Virginia he read in an English newspaper that his father had

been tried and found guilty of theft. For a dutiful son there was only one reaction, an immediate return to England. On his arrival there, however, he found that his father, though initially convicted, had somehow escaped punishment and was a free man. There is corroboration for part of Lawrence's story. Henry Lawrence, London diamond-broker, was arrested on 4 June 1811 and tried at the sessions beginning 26 July 1811, the case against him being much as in Lawrence's narrative.<sup>16</sup> The date of Lawrence's departure from America is thus in the few months after July 1811.

Having returned to England, Lawrence (by his own account) went to the bad. He became 'stage mad',<sup>17</sup> living in poverty as a chorister and bit player in the London theatres. Then 'at the latter end of 1812' (as he dates it) he wandered the country, apparently hoping to live by singing and theft. Failing at this, he returned to London where he spent his time 'Chaunting at every Harmonic Society—very much reduced in circumstances left destitute of a shilling'.<sup>18</sup> Finally, his parents took him back on the promise of a reformation. This took the form of packing him off to New York (with new clothes and £100) to work for a relative who was a merchant there.

Lawrence got as far as Liverpool before he was seduced from his purpose. He fell in with some actors, he says, and was recruited to sail to America as a support performer to the great tragedian, George Frederick Cooke.<sup>19</sup> What follows is a tale of crime and theatre in North America, initially with Cooke and then striking out on his own in Canada. Returning to New York, he robbed his New York relatives and sailed for England, giving his departure date as 5 December 1812.<sup>20</sup>

There are, however, major difficulties with this story of two visits to America in rapid succession. Cooke's visit to the United States is well documented and there is no reference to Lawrence as a member of his small support group which is clearly identified in the records.<sup>21</sup> Nor is there evidence for a production of *The Castle of Andalusia*, the play in which Lawrence says he first appeared, and this 'with a Crowded House'.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, I have been unable to trace any of his activities in Canada, though this may not be surprising, since they are relatively small scale. And finally, crucially, the dates do not fit.

Thus, Cooke arrived in the United States in late 1810 and Lawrence claims to have stayed with the New York company for about four months—that is, to March 1811.<sup>23</sup> But that is the period of the *first* visit to America, from which he returned in late 1811 on hearing of his father's arrest. In Lawrence's own chronology any second visit would need to have taken place late in 1812 but Cooke

died in New York in September of that year. If Lawrence had any involvement with Cooke, then, it must have occurred during the *first* trip and he must have met Cooke in America, not accompanied him from England. Alternatively, the story of performing with Cooke is a complete fantasy. In fact, the whole story of the second trip is probably a fiction since, if it ended in December 1812, that would leave only sixteen months after his return to accommodate a mass of events which included acquiring a mistress and having a child by her, spending twelve months in Cold Bath Fields prison, an unspecified time in a debtors prison and two months in Portugal. This phase of his career ended with a spate of robberies across the midlands which terminated 27 April 1814, when he was convicted of a robbery in Manchester and sentenced to seven years transportation to New South Wales.<sup>24</sup>

Lawrence arrived in Sydney on 25 April 1815.<sup>25</sup> He passed through a series of short-lived assignments to various masters before he picked a pocket and was sent off to Newcastle to serve an additional two-year sentence.<sup>26</sup> Within a few months of returning from this he fled to Calcutta, on board the ship *Mary* (he says). The vessel, which sailed from Sydney 17 August 1818 arrived in Calcutta on 28 November 1818.<sup>27</sup> What follows is a fascinatingly elaborate account of his life there—recognised as an escaped convict but taken up by the local gentry, performing at the Chowringhee theatre to great acclaim, singing at concerts and engaging in the odd bit of swindling, all under the name of George Frederick Laurent. The autobiography gives the impression that it was one of the high points of his life.<sup>28</sup>

As with his adventures in America there are doubts about these stories of Calcutta. The Chowringhee was primarily a theatre for gentlemen amateurs, though it occasionally hired professionals who were passing through the city.<sup>29</sup> The *Calcutta Journal*, the only Calcutta paper of which I have been able to locate a run, provides no reports of criminal trials but offers extensive reviews of the Chowringhee and the Dum Dum theatre performances. Nowhere in these is Lawrence (alias Laurent) mentioned; nor do the two plays he names from among those he performed, appear among the productions recorded. There are, moreover, problems with the chronology. Lawrence, by his own account, spent much of his time in Calcutta in prison. He seems to have been free for only about ten weeks, a short time to have accommodated all the events he described.

However glamorous his life may have been in Calcutta, it all came to a sudden stop when, in his own version, he took a knife to an officer and robbed him of bills and notes, almost killing him in

the process. Lawrence was sentenced to death, reprieved, and finally sentenced to seven years transportation, once again to New South Wales. He arrived in Sydney on 28 November 1819.<sup>30</sup> Initially the George Frederick Laurent from Calcutta was not recognised as the escapee James Lawrence, so that there was no immediate punishment. He was simply sent to Hyde Park Barracks and assigned to a lime-burning gang—as Lawrence, remembering Newcastle, wryly remarked ‘my old profession’.<sup>31</sup> He had done well for himself in Calcutta and managed to cut something of a dash in the Barracks, declaring ‘had plenty money, dressd to the nines’.<sup>32</sup>

Then a bout of dysentery saw him transported to the General Hospital, from which, he says, ‘[I] Broke out and made my Lucky on Board a French Man of War and got to Rio,—pulld out nothing Perticular occurrd’.<sup>33</sup> This story is highly suspect. Only one French warship left Sydney in the appropriate period, Louis de Freycinet’s *L’Uranie*, of whose voyage it could hardly be said ‘nothing Perticular occurred’. The vessel left Sydney on 28 December 1819 (barely a month after Lawrence’s return from Calcutta) and was wrecked on the Falkland Islands, leaving passengers and crew to starve for two months in the bitter cold. Finally, they were rescued and got to Rio, from which the crew returned to France.<sup>34</sup> In addition, a list of Lawrence’s major offences from 1815 to 1825 has survived in the archives. It itemises his Newcastle conviction, his escape to Calcutta, and offences up to three years after the sailing of the French vessel, but it makes no mention of an escape to Rio.<sup>35</sup>

It is difficult to see why Lawrence should tell a false story of an escape to Rio, particularly since he makes no effort to embroider it with any lively details. Perhaps it was to add to the sense of his derring-do and the vanity of being one of that select band, the three-times-transported. But if it is a fabrication this leaves room to accommodate his later claim to have been an overseer in the hospital and a constable in Hyde Park Barracks, positions which can only have been achieved between his return from Calcutta in 1819 and his conviction for theft in late 1822 or early 1823.

Lawrence writes in his autobiography that in punishment for his escape to Rio he was sentenced to twelve months in the Gaol Gang, the common penalty for the escapees from the colony on their recapture.<sup>36</sup> If I am correct, however, the punishment was not for an escape to Rio but for the escape to Calcutta, imposed when he was finally identified as an escapee.

Official records confirm Lawrence’s claim to have become overseer of the gang—he appears there as assistant overseer in January 1821 and overseer in September 1822.<sup>37</sup> In late 1822 or early 1823, however, he once again took a wrong turning, this time

by stealing a leg of mutton from a butcher's shop window in broad daylight. He was packed off to Emu Plains as punishment.<sup>38</sup>

Emu Plains, in spite of its bad reputation, was a relatively mild prison establishment, used for minor local offences and as a dispersal point for new arrivals from Britain. It also had a convict theatre, patronised by the governor on his frequent visits to the area. As Lawrence remarks: 'Had a Theatre there Play'd and sang Before his Excellency Sir Thomas Brisbane and other Gentlemen. Was a Great Favorite'.<sup>39</sup> He may have been a great favourite (though there is nothing to substantiate this claim) but that did not stop him from trying to bolt. On 27 September 1823 he was charged with absconding and, as a punishment, was sent to the more escape-proof Port Macquarie. By March 1826 his sentence was completed and he could return to Sydney.<sup>40</sup>

By now, in spite of his absences, Lawrence was a well-known character about town. In July 1826 a Sydney newspaper published a fanciful account of a party at a pub in which Lawrence figures:

NETTLETON'S half-way house was all alive on Tuesday Evening. A marvelous concatenation of Jew and Gentile—Scribe and Pharisee—all met for the purpose of *keeping it up*, as the phrase is—but with the motley groupe here assembled, harmony did not prevail to the extent evinced in other the like assemblages—for ere the night closed in, "*Milling*" was all the go, and any thing else but good-humour was the forte of some of the fraternity. The head of the supper table which was well laid out, was most *conveniently* (as it should seem) filled by our worthy promoter of the Peace *Mr. Israel Chapman*—and *Mister Lawrence*, alias *Blind Larry*, alias *Monsieur Laurent*, acted as *Croupier*.<sup>41</sup>

Israel Chapman, ex-resurrection man and ex-convict, was Sydney's leading detective. The Jewish thief-taker and the Jewish thief were mixing it socially. The reference to Lawrence as a croupier is a dig at his reputation as a gambler and card sharp.

Within a few days of this wild party Lawrence was in trouble again. On 2 August he was convicted of stealing thirty-eight yards of cloth and sentenced to seven years transportation.<sup>42</sup> Probably aware that his likely destination was the dreaded Moreton Bay, he quickly sent a petition to the governor, asking for a mitigation of sentence. A second petition was sent on 23 October, similar to the first but offering more details.<sup>43</sup> The man whose testimony had convicted him (he claims) was a notorious perjurer. He himself would be no use on a penal station, since his withered arm made

him unfit for heavy labour. Also, he was deserving of leniency in view of his past services to government as an informer and as a constable and overseer in Hyde Park Barracks and the General Hospital. It was to no avail. The first petition was annotated by an official: 'This petitioner, without exception, is as great a Scamp as any in the Colony...the Supt of Hyde Park Barracks can well give his history, and by no means favorable to him'. The second was likewise annotated: 'He is able, but not willing, nor ever has been, Since his arrival in this Colony he has invariably conducted himself as a vagabond, & no Person whatever except against their conscience could speak well of him'. Unforgiven, Lawrence sailed for Moreton Bay on 16 December.<sup>44</sup>

After his period at Moreton Bay Lawrence returned to Sydney and, as he said, 'took to Gaming and Accumulated...nearly 200 Purchased some good Toggs and forgot all that was past and to begin afresh'.<sup>45</sup> In fact, he was able to keep out of trouble for three years—or perhaps we should say that he managed to avoid being caught by the authorities. To be sure, he was charged with stealing a cut glass toilet bottle (value 12/-) but he was acquitted (though in the autobiography he admits his guilt).<sup>46</sup> There was also a series of financial swindles, his unsuccessful business as a purveyor of low grade ginger beer,<sup>47</sup> and his efforts to sell a large batch of adulterated oil. The last of these exploits backfired. He was pursued not by the authorities but by an irate customer, one of Sydney's hard men, 'Flash' Dick Crampton, who beat him up and forced him to drink a large amount of the oil, so that he ended up needing medical treatment.<sup>48</sup> Even from this, however, Lawrence managed to bounce back. He threatened Crampton with civil proceedings for assault and (he says) was paid off not to pursue the case. While 'Flash' Dick Crampton was a real person, a notorious Sydney thug, there is no external evidence for this series of frauds. One has to take them on trust.

Another event in this interlude between convictions (1834-1836) was his trip to Tasmania.<sup>49</sup> In Lawrence's version he married, and shortly after sailed to Tasmania to earn money. The endeavour failed, and he quickly fell into debt but, nevertheless, he continued to struggle to support his wife by sending remittances to her in Sydney.<sup>50</sup> It is a picture of husbandly solicitude that is made faintly suspect by its reiteration. What makes it more suspect is that external evidence reveals that the voyage to Tasmania he describes took place well before his marriage. He was on the island from 9 January to 10 September 1834<sup>51</sup> and his marriage to Sarah Shervington, a convict, took place on 5 May 1835.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the pair had commenced co-habitation before his departure, but it is not even certain that the lady was in Sydney at that time. Certainly, by May

1834 she was in gaol at Newcastle and negotiating to marry a different man entirely.<sup>53</sup> When she applied to marry Lawrence, incidentally, she was in gaol again, this time in the Female Factory, Parramatta, approaching the end of a two-month sentence for petty crimes.<sup>54</sup> Marriages from the Female Factory had a doubtful reputation, frequently being seen as acts of convenience rather than based on any affection. Could Lawrence's marriage have been of this kind? Lawrence is writing his autobiography some nine or ten years after the event. Could he simply have become confused about the relationship of certain events or were there two trips to Tasmania, with the remittances occurring on his second visit? Or was he inventing the story of the remittances to make himself look more admirable?

It was in the same period, 1834-1836, that Lawrence claims to have appeared in Barnett Levey's theatre in Sydney, though he mentions only two appearances—as an actor in *The Castle of Andalusia* and as the singer of a popular song, 'Bound Prentice to a Waterman', between two theatre-pieces on another evening.<sup>55</sup> By now it must come as no surprise to find that there is no record of a production of *Castle of Andalusia* in Sydney before September 1837,<sup>56</sup> by which time he was safely in prison on Norfolk Island. Also, I can find no one identifiable as Lawrence in any plays at Levey's theatre. I shall have more to say about the apprentice's song at a later point.

The year 1836 was the end of Lawrence's run of luck. As he says 'I was tried at the Quarter Sessions for 'Befriending a man'.<sup>57</sup> What he is getting at remains unclear. The newspaper reports reveal he was convicted for stealing a keg of beer from a refreshment stall at the Sydney races. Sentence—7 years at Norfolk Island.<sup>58</sup> This sentence saw the end of his brief marriage. By 1839 Sarah had decided that a husband on Norfolk Island was as good as a husband dead. In that year she bigamously married another convict in the back-blocks of New South Wales.<sup>59</sup>

On Norfolk Island Lawrence attempted to pursue his singing and acting career. In his autobiography he mentions that one commandant, Bunbury, sentenced him to a lashing for singing in the barracks after 6pm, and he may be implying that Bunbury blocked him in an attempt to produce a play.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, under Bunbury's successor, Ryan, Lawrence did make such an attempt, proposing a production to celebrate New Year's Day. As the Reverend Sharpe angrily wrote:

Last Sunday a Jew of the name of Laurent, had the audacity to write out on the Sunday a Play Bill, of some performance they

*Ms. B. Conf. 2399 to the Sydney General Hospital. Sydney 17<sup>th</sup> July. 1840*

## ROYAL VICTORIA THEATRE.

*Norfolk Island*  
*On Monday 25<sup>th</sup> May in honor of Her*  
**MAJESTY'S BIRTH DAY,**

*Will be performed by Permission*  
*Two Acts of the Admirals Commanders of the*  
**CASTLE of ANDALUSIA.**

<i>Don Cesar</i>	<i>In<sup>o</sup> Laurence</i>	<i>Suzanna</i>	<i>In<sup>o</sup> Countess</i>
<i>Scipio</i>	<i>Gen<sup>o</sup> Wolfe</i>	<i>Supena</i>	<i>In<sup>o</sup> Prince</i>
<i>Fernando</i>	<i>In<sup>o</sup> Walker</i>	<i>Caterina</i>	<i>Her<sup>o</sup> Sonnet</i>
<i>Alphonsus</i>	<i>W<sup>o</sup> Wilton</i>	<i>Imogen</i>	<i>W<sup>o</sup> Swellerton</i>
<i>Spate</i>	<i>In<sup>o</sup> King</i>	<i>Louisa</i>	<i>De</i>
<i>Pedro</i>	<i>In<sup>o</sup> Bonds</i>	<i>With the usual Ballets</i>	

*After which a Musical* *Balance* *consisting of*

<i>Glee " Brothers Brothers good to the Deed "</i>	<i>W<sup>o</sup> Wilton</i>	<i>Song " Princes, Princes Etc "</i>	<i>J. Laurence</i>
<i>Song " Old England for Ever "</i>	<i>J. Wilton</i>	<i>Song " Youth of the Moon "</i>	<i>H. Wilton</i>
<i>Comic Song " Walker the long-jointed Postman "</i>	<i>J. Laurence</i>	<i>Song " The night Irishman "</i>	<i>J. Porter</i>
<i>Song " Present presents to a Waterman "</i>	<i>J. Laurence</i>	<i>Glee " Dear little Robin "</i>	<i>J. Porter</i>
<i>" The Fisherman's Glee "</i>	<i>J. Wilton</i>	<i>Song " The Old Doctor "</i>	<i>J. Laurence</i>
<i>Song " Paddy from Cork "</i>	<i>J. Wilton</i>	<i>The First Scene in Richard 3<sup>rd</sup> " H. Wilton</i>	
<i>Glee " Behold how beautiful "</i>	<i>W<sup>o</sup> Wilton</i>		

*Sacred Marriage* *—* *Arch<sup>o</sup> Burns* *Dance* *Tyrone's Waltz* *—* *The Merry*  
*After which the Musical Balance*

### Purse or the Benevolent Tar

<i>The Parson</i>	<i>J. Crawford</i>	<i>Will Steady</i>	<i>J. Laurence</i>
<i>The Doctor</i>	<i>J. Ralph</i>	<i>Sally</i>	<i>J. Steady</i>
<i>Edmund</i>	<i>W. Swellerton</i>	<i>Phoebe</i>	<i>J. King</i>

*After which*

<i>Duette Curves in Character</i>	<i>J. Laurence</i>	<i>The Power of Wine</i>	<i>J. Wilton</i>
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*The Whole to conclude with the Grand* *Solemn* *Antiphon of* **GOD SAVE THE QUEEN**

*Grand Rejoice*

Playbill from the Royal Victoria Theatre, Norfolk Island, for the performance of

'The Castle of Andalusia', 25 May 1840, MS2738(2741815).

(By permission of the National Library of Australia.)

wanted to get up for New Year's day, in case the Commandant gave them a holiday, but he was not punished...I rather think the Major will give them a half-holiday, but of course, will not allow them to perform their play.<sup>61</sup>

Under Maconochie, the next commandant, Lawrence got his chance. Maconochie decided to celebrate the Queen's birthday on a grand scale by suspending all work for the day, allowing the convicts the freedom to wander the island until 8 o'clock in the evening, providing them with a celebratory meal for the occasion and organising sporting events and a theatrical performance to entertain them. In view of Lawrence's attempt to stage a play during Ryan's brief period in charge of the island, it seems likely that he was behind the idea of including a performance in the celebrations. Certainly an anonymous account gives him a managerial role in the production:

A play has been allowed to be performed by the prisoners, to amuse their companions. A prisoner, I think of the name of Laurent, was the chief promoter and performer of this. Some of the colonists, in all probability, have heard of this hero of the Norfolk Island stage before today.<sup>62</sup>

A manuscript playbill for the event has survived.<sup>63</sup> The program is a miscellaneous one, comprising two acts of what seems to be Lawrence's favourite piece, *The Castle of Andalusia*, in which he plays the Brigand Chief, a short afterpiece by John Cross, *The Purse*, in which he plays the hero, the tent scene from *Richard III* and a medley of glees and solo songs, dances and recitations. Three of the eight solo songs are also performed by Lawrence as well as what appears to be a recitation 'in character'. Lawrence's dominance of the stage may be a reflection of his calibre as an actor, but it is just as likely to reflect his influence as the manager of the company.

When news of Maconochie's celebration reached Sydney, the result, in conservative sections of the population, and the conservative press, was outrage and horror. Norfolk Island was meant to be a place of terror, the ultimate deterrent, and here it was being turned into a holiday camp. Maconochie defended his policies vigorously, but in much of the press he became an object of ridicule, for nothing more so than the theatrical production.<sup>64</sup> One of the ironies is that this, which was arguably Lawrence's most significant performance, is passed over by him without a mention. It is not recorded in the autobiography. Instead, we learn of it from outside sources.

Lawrence's account of his life is littered with inaccuracies. However, relatively few of these occur in his account of the crimes with which he was charged. Independent sources such as court records and newspaper articles can usually be found to confirm these.<sup>65</sup> His undetected crimes are a different matter. By their nature, these usually lack external corroboration and it is unwise to assume that, because the crimes of which he was accused are truthfully reported, so also are all his undetected crimes. The major falsifications in Lawrence's narrative, however, appear to relate to his theatrical activities and the circumstances surrounding them. Outside the autobiography there are few references to him as a performer. The slenderness of this list is not, by itself, enough to destroy his claims as a performer, but it does reinforce the doubts raised by his autobiography. He may have been an enthusiastic actor and an even more enthusiastic singer, but were most of his performances the success that he suggests they were? Indeed, did some of them even take place? Was he, ultimately, a fantasist weaving exaggerated facts and complete fiction into a self-image as a talented actor and singer, so giving some glamour to an otherwise drab existence as a petty criminal and card sharp? An explanation in these terms can result in a Lawrence who is a faintly pathetic figure. On the other hand, his sardonic humour and his lack of feeling for others, may point to something meaner, a hard-boiled criminal whose lying was a form of power-play undertaken for the pleasure of toying with people, of amusing himself at their gullibility. If so, it is an impulse that is pathological in its dimensions. Of course, neither of these suggestions can comfortably explain all of his departures from the truth. Perhaps one has to fall back on the idea that some of them at least are evidence of a mind that is seriously addled. Over the years had he been kicked in the head too often by the likes of 'Flash' Dick Crampton?

One more (sobering) thought about Lawrence as a performer. In the absence of commentary one is left to wonder at the quality of his acting and his singing. Lawrence, with his 'pock-pitted' face, large broken Roman nose, blind in one eye and with a withered arm makes an unlikely stage hero.<sup>66</sup> There is, moreover, one account of a performer at Levey's theatre which *may* be a reference to Lawrence. On 7 December 1833 a person identified in the playbill only as 'an amateur' sang 'Bound Prentice to a Waterman'. For what little is left of Lawrence's credibility one can only hope that this is not our man, cloaking his identity in anonymity to evade his creditors. A review of the evening has survived. It reads in part:

Between this and the next piece a person styled an Amateur, came forward to sing in character, "Bound Prentice to a Waterman". We have had frequent occasion to reprobate the rash absurd attempts of people to sing and dance, who have not the slightest pretensions, but all former abortions were excellent, when compared to this. The only redeeming point this person had, was his unparalleled effrontery. The hisses of the audience seemed but to increase his confidence, and by way of revenging himself for their disapprobation, sang each verse twice over!<sup>67</sup>

The song was extremely popular at the time so that Lawrence was not the only person who could have decided to sing it. But it adds to the worry that at Levey's theatre that night it was sung immediately after John Cross's musical play, *The Purse*, and that these two pieces appeared together in the Norfolk Island celebration, with Lawrence both singing the song and playing a lead role in the play.

#### AFTERWORD

Lawrence's autobiography ends with him preparing to return to Sydney at the end of his sentence in late 1842. The next we hear of him, however, is in Hobart, where Rabbi John Levi has traced him receiving a peddler's license in 1844 and as a member of the Hobart Synagogue from 1845 to 1847.<sup>68</sup> Thereafter he disappears from the records for over ten years, reappearing in December 1861 in Melbourne, where he is being tried for receiving a stolen watch.<sup>69</sup> He was acquitted but, under interrogation, seems to have told the police that he had sailed to Victoria on the *Blanche Moore*, which had arrived direct from England in 1857.<sup>70</sup> The passenger list for this vessel includes a Charles Lawrence, aged seventy, who is described as an 'agent' and who appears to be travelling without any family.<sup>71</sup> This could be James Lawrence, using a half-hearted alias, or he could have arrived on the *Blanche Moore* as a crew member and so not have appeared in the records. Alternatively, of course, his claim to have arrived on the vessel may have been a fabrication, designed to mislead the police and hide his convict background. Melbournians were not overly keen on the idea of convicts flocking to their lily-white state. If Lawrence had returned to England some time after 1847 it is difficult to see what would have drawn him back to Australia in 1857, evidently to a life of impoverishment and failing health.

Though Lawrence escaped sentence in December 1861 he was not so lucky a year later, when he was charged with receiving a

stolen shawl and sentenced to three months in gaol.<sup>72</sup> Even before this trial came on, however, the police were trying to pin another crime on him. In August 1862 a drunken shopkeeper was robbed of his watch and chain while staggering home. A woman was promptly arrested for pawning the chain, but denied any involvement with the watch, claiming it was in the possession of 'Lawrence, the bleary-eyed Jew'.<sup>73</sup> In fact Lawrence had already disposed of it. The watch was not found for several months and when it was Lawrence was already in prison serving his three months' sentence. He was brought from gaol for his new trial 2 February 1863:

Prisoner said he was seventy-seven years of age, and had been fifty-two years in the colony. He had lately been discharged from the Hospital, afflicted with an incurable disease, and he hoped the court would take into consideration his age and infirmities. A previous conviction having been proved against the prisoner, he was sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment.<sup>74</sup>

At his earlier trial, for receiving a stolen shawl, Lawrence had also mentioned his hospitalisation. At that stage the illness was described as 'paralysis, and a variety of infirmities.'<sup>75</sup> Talk of paralysis makes one wonder whether he was trading on that long-since-damaged arm or whether he had fallen victim to strokes and other afflictions. Advancing his age and period of residence by ten years was evidently intended to strengthen his appeal for clemency.

Lawrence did not live out his new sentence. As Rabbi Levi has discovered, he died in the Collingwood Stockade 1 September 1863.<sup>76</sup> He was buried in the Jewish cemetery, presumably at the expense of his co-religionists, who stood by him, in spite of all his failings.

### ENDNOTES

1. 'The Historical Account of the Life of James Lawrence', Dixson MS Q168, item 1, Mitchell Library (ML).
2. *Ibid*, p.79.
3. *Ibid*, p.62.
4. See below, pp.12-13.
5. For his devotion to his father see Lawrence, pp.5-6. For his concern for his mistress see *ibid*, pp.27-8, and for his wife, *ibid*, pp.62, 64.
6. *Ibid*, pp.20-3.
7. Rev Thomas Sharpe, 'Journal of Norfolk Island', MS B218, p.156, ML; 'Bridge Street Synagogue Letterbook, 1840-1844', File 888, p.6, Australian Jewish Historical Society; Lawrence p.63.

8. *Ibid*, pp.63-5.
9. Anne Conlon, '“Mine is a Sad yet True Story”: Convict Narratives 1818-1850', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol.55 (1969), pp.43-82.
10. James John Knight, *In the Early Days: History and Incident of Pioneer Queensland* (Brisbane: Sapsford, 1895), p.47.
11. Public Record Office, CO207/1, f.108 (PRO); State Records of New South Wales, 4/1900, no.26/5235 (SRNSW); Lawrence, pp.58-60.
12. *Ibid*, pp.8-10.
13. *Ibid*, pp.66-7.
14. *Citizen*, vol.1, no.11, 7 November 1846, p.8. See also Pierce Egan, *The Life of an Actor* (London: Methuen, 1904), p.111 (first published 1824).
15. Lawrence, pp.11, 34, 56, 60.
16. *Old Bailey Session Papers*, July 1811, pp.327-30.
17. Lawrence, pp.7-8.
18. *Ibid*, pp.10-11.
19. *Ibid*, p.11.
20. *Ibid*, p.19.
21. William Dunlap, *Memoirs of George Fred Cooke, Esq.*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1813), vol.2, pp. 112-331; George C. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 15 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927-1949), vol.2. pp.348-70.
22. Lawrence, p.12. I have confirmed this negative finding with the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Lincoln Centre.
23. *Ibid*, p.12.
24. *Ibid*, pp.25-33. The date of his conviction comes from the convict indent for the *Indefatigable*, SRNSW, 4/ 4005, 259. 632.
25. Lawrence's transport, the *Indefatigable*, arrived in Sydney 25 April 1815, not, as he says, in May. See J.S. Cumpston, *Shipping Arrivals and Departures, Sydney, 1788-1825* (Canberra: Roebuck Society, 1977), p.97.
26. Lawrence, pp.35-7. Lawrence says he was apprehended in 1815 and sailed on the *Lady Nelson*, but SRNSW, 4/ 3494, p.235, dated 22 October 1815, is an instruction to send him to Newcastle on the *Estramina*. SRNSW, 4/1990, no. 26/ 5235 indicates that his crime was picking a pocket.
27. Cumpston, p.113; *Calcutta Journal*, 1 December 1818, column 392.
28. Lawrence, pp. 40-54.
29. For the Chowringhee theatre see S.K.Mukherjee, *The Story of the Calcutta Theatres, 1753-1980* (Calcutta: K.P.Bagchi, 1982), pp.3-5 and Sudipto Chatterjee, *The Colonial Staged* (London: Seagull Books, 2007), pp.17-25.
30. Lawrence, pp.50-1; PRO, CO207/ 1, f.108; *Calcutta Journal*, 26 June 1819, column 1115; Cumpston, p.118. Lawrence was convicted not for the wounding of Captain Jones but for embezzlement—presumably the passing of the bills and notes he had stolen from the captain.
31. Lawrence, p.56.
32. *Ibid*.
33. *Ibid*, p.57.
34. Cumpston, p.57; Rose de Freycinet, *A Woman of Courage: The Journal of Rose de Freycinet*, trans. and ed. Marc Serge Rivière (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996), p.121; Jacques Arago, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World* (London: Treuttel, 1823).

35. Annotation on SRNSW, 4/1900, no.26/5235. This is presumably drawn from the convict conduct records, the so-called Black Books. A mangled version of the same list appears in SRNSW, 4/2269.91, p.[8].
36. John Thomas Bigge, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry, into the State of the Colony of New South Wales* (London: House of Commons, 1822), p.27; John Slater, *A Description of Sydney, Parramatta, Newcastle &c*, (Bridlesmith-Gate: Sutton, 1819), p.8; Paula J. Byrne, *Criminal Law and Colonial Subject* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.33.
37. Lawrence, p.57; ML. Dixon Spencer 54, pp.403-4, 485; Carol J. Baxter (ed.), *General Muster and Land and Stock Muster of New South Wales, 1822* (Sydney: ABGR, 1988), p.286, no.A12562.
38. Lawrence, p.57. The crime for which he was sent to Emu Plains, but not the date, is recorded in SRNSW, 4/1900, no.26/5235.
39. Lawrence, p.57. For the theatre at Emu Plains see Robert Jordan, *The Convict Theatres of Early Australia, 1788-1840* (Sydney: Currency House, 2002), pp.150-78.
40. SRNSW, 4/3864, p.78; SRNSW, 4/6428, p.131; *Sydney Gazette*, 22 March 1826, p.3 (SG).
41. *Sydney Monitor*, 7 July 1826, p.64b (SM). The SM, 14 July 1826, p.66c, contains a letter of refutation from the innkeeper which declares 'as to Larry, I consider you have wantonly injured my house, in representing him as a conspicuous guest at my table, and cast disrespect on the very respectable persons who were present'.
42. Lawrence, p.58; SG, 12 July 1826, p.3c and 9 August, p.3b; SM, 18 August 1826, p.107c; SRNSW, 4/6430, p.[213].
43. SRNSW, 4/1900, no.26/5235 and 4/8014.3, no. 26/6856.
44. SRNSW, 4/6430, p.[213]. See also SRNSW, 4/6429, p.[65].
45. Lawrence, p.60.
46. Ibid, p.67; *Sydney Herald*, 12 January 1835, p.2c (SH) and SG, 13 January 1835, p.2d.
47. Lawrence, p.67. The sale of ginger beer was restricted to licensed premises and in 1834-1836 the government was conducting a campaign against illicit sellers, of whom Lawrence was probably one. See SH, 26 March 1835, p.3c and 26 March 1835, p.3c; SM, 1 April 1835, p.3a; SG, 3 August 1835, p.2f.
48. Richard Crampton, a licensed victualler, ran one of Sydney's more notorious gambling dens, incongruously named 'The Family Hotel' (SH, 2 June 1836, pp.2g-3a. See also 13 October 1836, p.3b). Between March 1834 and October 1836 there were at least six occasions on which he was involved in violent physical attacks on others. SH, 13 October 1836, p.3b, not unjustly described him as 'a very irritable man'. See SH, 13 March 1834, p.3a; 11 December 1834, p.2e; SG, 11 March 1834, p.2f; 17 October 1835, p.3a; SM, 7 May 1834, p.3b; 13 December 1834, p.3d; 14 October 1835, p.3b; *Australian*, 18 April 1834, p.2d and 9 December 1834, p.2c.
49. Lawrence, pp.61-5.
50. Ibid, pp.62, 64, 70.
51. For his arrival date see Archives Office of Tasmania, MB2/39/2, p.6. For his departure, from Launceston, see *Launceston Advertiser*, 10 September 1834, p.2d. His arrival in Sydney is recorded in SH, 26 September 1834, p.2a. For his presence in Sydney and a report of his

recent arrival from Tasmania see *SM*, 12 January 1835, p.2c. The autobiography (pp.64-5) claims that he left Launceston to try his luck in West Australia and returned to Sydney from there, working his passage. However, the records make it quite clear that he sailed direct from Launceston to Sydney. Could Lawrence have conflated two trips, the second (after his marriage) taking in Perth and Albany as well as Tasmania?

52. SRNSW, 4/2269.91, p.[8]; Registrar's Office of New South Wales, Marriages, vol.19, no.1088. His wife, Sarah, was a native of Birmingham and Protestant, and was sentenced to transportation for seven years for 'man robbery' at Warwick Assizes in March 1831. At the time she was seventeen, and a mere five feet tall. Her crime involved the robbery of a male adult with actual or threatened violence and this, together with her prison sentences in the colony, her running away from her master in 1837, and her subsequent bigamy suggests a strong personality, to say the least. See SRNSW, X634.177.702; *New South Wales Government Gazette*, 11 March 1835, p.141, 13 December 1837, p.936, and 20 December 1837, p.946.
53. SRNSW, 4/2225.4, p.13.
54. SRNSW, 4/6435, no.657.
55. Lawrence, pp.66-7.
56. Eric Irvin, *Dictionary of the Australian Theatre, 1788-1914* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1985), p.65.
57. Lawrence, p.73.
58. *SG*, 9 July 1836, p.3b; *SM*, 9 July 1836, p.3a. Lawrence was tried on 7 July but did not sail for Norfolk Island until 30 October.
59. Registrar's Office of New South Wales, Marriages, vol.23, no.379; SRNSW, 4/2439.2, p.24.
60. Lawrence, p.78: 'The Major was a strict man and no Lover of the Drama'.
61. ML,B218, pp.54-5.
62. *SG*, 25 June 1840, p.3b.
63. PRO, CO201/199, p.108.
64. For further details of Maconochie's festival and the response to it, see Jordan, op. cit., pp.184-98.
65. One exception is the crime which earned him a year in Cold Bath Fields prison in 1813. It is described in the autobiography (p.30) as 'a Forgery on Mr Rochford in Piccadilly' but appears in the *Old Bailey Session Papers*, January 1813, pp.110-11, as the theft of two books from Francis Clark, bookseller in Piccadilly.
66. From the description book of the *Phoenix* hulk, preparatory to his sailing to Norfolk Island, 30 October 1836, except that the record lists him as 'squints with left eye' rather than blind in one eye. See SRNSW, 4/6280, p.60. In his earlier years, of course, he may have been more presentable.
67. *Australian*, 9 December 1833, p.2e. The *SM*, 11 December 1833, p.3a, noted that the anonymous singer was 'deservedly hissed'.
68. John Simon Levi, *The Forefathers: A Dictionary of Biography of the Jews of Australia, 1788-1830* (Sydney: Australian Jewish Historical Society, 1976), p.66; John S. Levi and G.F.J. Bergman, *Australian Genesis: Jewish Convicts and Settlers, 1788-1860*, 2d ed (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), pp.315-6.

69. *Argus*, 14 December 1861, p.5e.
70. Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV), VPRS 502/1, nos.006-7, 0015, 0017.
71. PROV, VPRS 11448/P1, p.3; VPRS 994/PO (Inward Passenger List, *Blanche Moore*).
72. *Age*, 18 December 1862, p.6c; *Argus*, 19 December 1862, p.7b.
73. *Argus*, 22 August 1862, p.5e.
74. *Age*, 5 February 1863, p.6e. See also *Victorian Police Gazette*, February 1863, no.69; [Melbourne] *Herald*, 5 February 1863, p.7a.
75. *Argus*, 19 December 1862, p.7b.
76. Levi, op. cit., p.66.