

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (December 2000)

By Rob Upson

Last month I made reference to Henry Lawson's poem about the coaching days of Cobb & Co. Lawson was known as "the people's poet" for he captured the mood of his times and was the first articulate voice of the real Australia. He was born in a tent on the Grenfell goldfield, N.S.W., in 1867 and died in Sydney in 1922. This poem was written in 1897.

The Lights of Cobb & Co.

Fire lighted, on the table a meal for sleepy men,
A lantern in the stable, a jingle now and then;
The mail-coach looming darkly by light of moon and star,
The growl of sleepy voices- a candle in the bar;
A stumble in the passage of folk with wits abroad;
A swear word from a bedroom – the shout of "All aboard!"
"Tchk-tchk! Git-up!" "Hold fast, there!" and down the range we go;
Five hundred miles of scattered camps will watch for Cobb & Co.

Old coaching towns already 'decaying for their sins',
Uncounted 'Half-way Houses,' and scores of 'Ten-Mile Inns';
The riders from the stations by lonely granite peaks;
The black-boy for the shepherds on sheep and cattle creeks;
The roaring camps of Gulgong, and many a 'Digger's Rest';
The diggers on the Lachlan; the huts of Farthest West;
Some twenty thousand exiles who sailed for weal or woe-
The bravest hearts of twenty lands will wait for Cobb & Co.

The morning star has vanished, the frost and fog are gone,
In one of those grand mornings which but on mountains dawn;
A flask of friendly whisky – each other's hopes we share-
And throw our top-coats open to drink the mountain air.
The roads are rare to travel, and life seems all complete;
The grind of wheels on gravel, the trot of horses' feet,
The trot, trot, trot and canter, as down the spur we go-
The green sweeps to horizons blue that call for Cobb & Co.

We take a bright girl actress through western dusts and damp,
To bear the home-world message, and sing for sinful camps,
To stir our hearts and break them, wild hearts that hope and ache-
(Ah! When she thinks again of these her own must nearly break!)
Five miles this side the goldfield, a loud, triumphant shout;
Five hundred cheering diggers have snatched the horses out;
With "Auld Lang Syne" in chorus, through roaring camps they go
That cheer for her, and cheer for Home, and cheer for Cobb & Co.

Three lamps above the ridges and gorges dark and deep,
A flash on sandstone cuttings where sheer the sidlings sweep,
A flash on shrouded wagons, on water ghastly white;
Weird bush and scattered remnants of 'rushes in the night';
Across the swollen river a flash beyond the ford;
Ride hard to warn the driver! He's drunk or mad, good Lord!
But on the bank to westward a broad and cheerful glow-
New camps extend across the plains, new routes for Cobb & Co.

Swift scramble up the sidling where teams climb inch by inch;
Pause, bird-like, on the summit – then breakneck down the pinch;
By clear, ridge-country rivers, and gaps where tracks run high,
Where waits the lonely horseman, cut clear against the sky;
Past haunted half-way houses – where convicts made the bricks-
Scrub-yards and new bark shanties, we dash with five and six;
Through stringy-bark and blue-gum, and box and pine we go-
A hundred miles shall see tonight the lights of Cobb & Co !

Reference: Selected Poems of Henry Lawson