

Potency of the Pen

Jennifer Moran ponders the iconography of several pens in the Library's Collection



Would a computer used by an admired writer move us if we saw it in an exhibition? Perhaps, but probably not in the way a pen would. There is something intimate about a pen: its peculiar characteristics endear it to the user and its close association with writer or statesman or history makes it interesting to the rest of us.

As a tool, a pen proves its worth with functionality, its adaptation to the human scale. The best pens take account not just of the necessity of making a legible mark upon paper but also of their feel in the hand that holds them.

Some pens are beautiful—their form as carefully designed as their function. Some acquire beauty as fingers polish their wood with use, or as a nib is ground to make perfect letters. And some pens are plain ugly, but fascinating nevertheless. One of Henry Lawson's pens in the National Library's Collection is a case in point. This is how it looks: a stub of pencil, mustard yellow, has a nib bound to it with a roughly knotted, roughly wound piece of string. The string is discoloured with ink, and possibly sweat. Underneath the string is another binding, black—perhaps embroidery thread. On the lower end of the pencil the paint is shaved and the initials 'R.N.' and a smudged third letter, which might be another R or a D, are written on the bare wood beneath. The nib, rusted now, has a half-moon cut-out.

A note with the pen reads: 'The pen in this envelope was one used by Henry Lawson at Leeton, N.S.W. It was given to Clair Kennedy by Mrs Jim Gordon ('Erahame'), and passed on to me by Clair, on 11/11/1963. Harry Pearce'.

In 1916, Henry Lawson's friends, concerned about his drinking and his erratic living arrangements, had organised a job for him at Leeton, to provide data for the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area. He lived in

Leeton from January 1916 to August 1917. To look at this pen, fragile now, one must lift it from the box using parsilk (an inert fabric used for conservation).

This pen is a much humbler instrument than another pen used by Lawson and also held in the Library's Collection. This second pen, dated c.1900, is a plain wooden one mounted with a metal nib. The wood is dark and nicely tapered. The pen's end is very worn, the varnish quite gone. (Did Lawson suck the end of his pen as he pondered rhyme or structure, or mulled over the words he wrote to his friends?) It has an elegant, silver-coloured nib holder, now pitted; the nib itself is classical and spare. The tip is not symmetrical—whether ground for italic writing, or simply broken, is not clear.

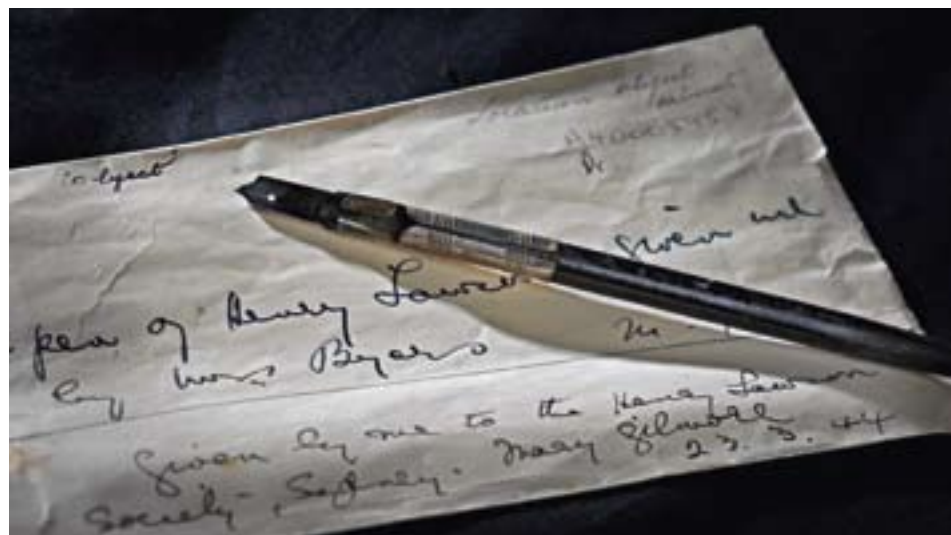
In 1900, Lawson went to England with his wife Bertha and their children. He corresponded with Miles Franklin and, in England, promoted her work as well as trying to make a name for himself as a writer. But this English sojourn was not happy. Lawson apparently drank excessively, Bertha was hospitalised and there was other misery in the marriage. Lawson did write the four Joe Wilson



top to bottom:
Pen Used by Henry Lawson at Leeton, NSW [1916–17]
pencil lead, wood, steel and string
10.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23078287

The Johnson Studios
Portrait of Henry Lawson c.1900
gelatin silver photograph;
27.5 x 17.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23351958

Pen Once Owned by Henry Lawson
c.1900
wood and metal; 16.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7754351





above left:
T. Humphrey & Co.
Portrait of W.M. Hughes 1908
sepia-toned gelatin silver
photograph; 12.5 x 8.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23366522



above right:
William Morris Hughes'
Fountain Pen in its Case
Manuscripts Collection
MS 1538, Series 50

stories in England and some of his work was published, but, as reported in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Online Edition), 'Lawson himself in later years provided fuel for the idea that his English interlude, so eagerly anticipated, was in fact a catastrophe: "Days in London like a nightmare"; "That wild run to London/That wrecked and ruined me".'

This second Lawson pen came into the collection through Mr John Vincent, from Croydon, New South Wales. A note says it arrived 'via [Dame] Mary Gilmore', who was Lawson's friend and defender. A manila envelope bears the inscription: 'A pen of Henry Lawson's, given me by Mrs Byers, M.G. Given by me to the Henry Lawson Society, Sydney. Mary Gilmore 23.3.44.' Mrs Byers was Isabel Byers, Lawson's protector and sometime saviour, who from 1904 until his death in 1922 frequently provided lodging and succour.

Both of Lawson's pens are a far cry from the pen owned by former Prime Minister W.M. 'Billy' Hughes, held in the Library's Collection with other of his personal effects dating from 1900 to 1940. The 'Little Digger's' golf stick, his false teeth and his hearing aid might be interesting to all sorts of researchers, one imagines, but his pen—instrument of signature and jotted thoughts—is evocative for different reasons. Technology was replacing the simple nib pen, by this time. Hughes had a Waterman's Ideal Fountain Pen. It is cradled in a velvet case, adorned with Waterman's proud

motto, 'Makes its mark all around the world', stamped inside the lid. Hughes' initials are engraved on the pen, which is black, trimmed with gold, and possessed of the then-fashionable pump lever used to fill the reservoir with ink.

Hughes' pen is presently on loan to Old Parliament House for the travelling exhibition *Billy Hughes at War*, which opened at Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance in February this year and will be at Old Parliament House in Canberra, in June.

Curator Laura Back, while focusing the exhibition on Hughes during the First World War, also wants to portray Hughes the man. She believes that the regulations that Hughes passed, and the way he governed, make his character evident, but that the more personal objects, including his pen, have their interest too. She quotes Hughes himself on this matter, Hughes having once said: 'There was a time when the constitution of this country was in my fountain pen.'

The fledging of the national seat of government is marked with another pen held in the Library's Collection—the pen and inkwell used at the first sale of leases in the Federal Capital Territory. The silver lid of the inkstand is engraved with the commemorative words: 'This Inkwell was used at the first sale of leases in the Federal Capital Territory conducted on behalf of the Government of the Commonwealth by Richardson & Wrench Ltd Sydney and Messrs Woodgers and Calthorpe Queanbeyan on

the 19th December 1924'. The bottom of the inkstand is glass, the base cut in a diamond pattern in rows. A hallmark on the lid, and maker's mark, show it to be from Birmingham, made from sterling silver in 1918.

The pen itself is long and silver, tapering to the end, with a small knob to finish it. The underside of the nib is gold. There is also a mallet (a gavel really) included in the set—presumably the one used to knock down each lot as it was sold.

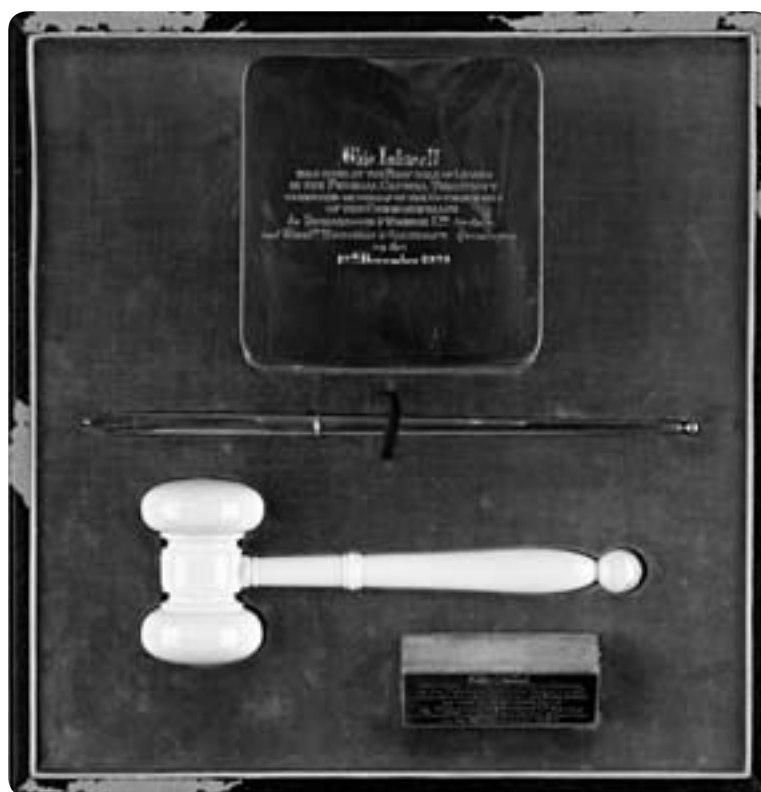
Particular acts of government are sometimes themselves commemorated with a presentation pen. The fountain pen used to sign the security treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the United States (the ANZUS Treaty) is held in the Library's Collection. The Australian Ambassador to the United States, the Hon. Percy Spender, signed the treaty in San Francisco on 1 September 1951.

Historical documents released by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade include the 'Statement to be made by Spender' at that occasion. The Treaty marked, he said, 'the first step in the building of the ramparts of freedom in the vast and increasingly important area of the Pacific Ocean'. Labelling the Treaty 'an instrument not of offence but of defence', Spender declared it 'a pact for peace'. The Treaty sought to defend the longstanding values of

freedom to worship, freedom to work and live together without fear of aggression from without or tyranny from within, freedom to associate peacefully for social progress, remedying of injustices, and for improving the lot of the underprivileged, freedom to strive for that form of society which will best secure and preserve ... constitutional liberty, social justice and equality before the law, and such is our dedication to these principles that there is no effort we will spare that they may not be imperilled.

The 11 articles of the ANZUS Treaty set out the parameters of the agreement, which was signed by Spender, by C.A. Berendsen for New Zealand, and by Dean Acheson, John Foster Dulles, Alexander Wiley and John J. Sparkman for the United States.

The commemorative pen is black—a Sheaffer, made predominantly of plastic. Towards its narrow end, lines are close-etched into the surface. It is decorated with a gold band on the lid piece and a gold pocket clip. Above the clip is the trademark



white dot of Sheaffer pens. On the gold band is engraved, 'SECURITY TREATY 1951'.

The pen's lid unscrews, it has a metal thread inside and a corresponding narrow metal band circles the pen. The nib is rounded, gold, its tip silver-coloured—perhaps iridium. 'Sheaffer. Made in USA 14k' is engraved on it. Little dots of dried ink fall from the lid or nib as the lid is unscrewed, traces from a brief time when the world hoped that the pen was indeed mightier than the sword.

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above:
Inkstand Including Pen, Inkwell and Mallet used at the First Sale of Leases in the Federal Capital Territory 1924
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7969459

below:
Sheaffer Pen Used by P.C. Spender to Sign the ANZUS Security Treaty with New Zealand and the USA 1951
metal and plastic; 13.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7754366

