

CRAIG CORMICK

On the Road

We find Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson walking along a busy road in London, going against the flow of the many faces in the street, muttering to each other like a pair of homeless crazies. They have both come to London to escape the pain of a broken heart, and the men, rivals in so many things, have discovered that they have shared the same mistress! Yet if either expected to find some consolation in the other's suffering, they have instead found it exacerbates their own.

'Londoners used to be more friendly,' Lawson rants, as another well-dressed workaday person steps into the gutter to avoid them.

'You're spooking them,' says Paterson. 'You look like a drunken bagman.'

'What's wrong with being a drunken bagman?' asks Lawson.

Paterson doesn't answer that, but says, 'You shouldn't drink so much. Or at least you shouldn't start so early in the day.'

'It's not early in the day in Australia,' says Lawson. 'It's late. So very late.'

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Our two unlikely companions found a small apartment near Kings Cross Station overlooking a fenced garden and they spent their first morning sitting by the window, pouring over maps and

brochures of London, carefully planning where they will go – and not go. Paterson looked out the window and saw two young lovers sitting in the park. He tried hard to ignore them, but his eyes kept being drawn back, lingering on them painfully until he was forced to close the curtain.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Lawson.

‘Have you found a safe route into the city?’ Paterson asked him.

‘I think so,’ said Lawson. ‘But I hadn’t anticipated there being so many bookshops and bookstalls around the streets here.’

‘And this!’ says Paterson, and stabs his finger to the map. ‘Look. The bloody Dickens Museum. It’s just around the corner from here.’

Henry pulls a face. ‘We will go the other way then. There’s another museum here we could visit.’ And he stabs his own finger to the Wellcome Trust Collection.

Paterson looks at the name. ‘What is it?’ he asks.

‘Be buggered if I know. But it looks safe.’

They leave the apartment and negotiate a path to the Wellcome building and find they have walked into an exhibition on human sickness. There are all kinds of diseases that warp the body and the mind displayed there. They find a life-like, massively-obese body with the head almost submerged in folds of skin. They find diseased organs and body parts. They find instruments used to treat diseases. It makes their heads spin. The genteel patrons around them express small gasps of fascination, peering intently at the most gruesome details. But all Lawson says is, ‘There should be something on heartbreak here. Surely it’s a sickness too, isn’t it?’

Paterson hates to agree with Lawson on anything and so says nothing and pretends to be busy with a map of malarial regions of the world. But he tucks the question away in that certain part of his memory, for using later in a poem or something.

Back on the street the men are walking up towards Kings Cross Tube Station, and have just crossed the road before they notice they are standing in front of the British Library.

'Bitch!' says Lawson.

'Can't she leave us alone?' asks Paterson.

But of course she drags them inside.

They creep around the foyer of the building like men with razors in their shoes. They find a glass case over ten metres in length, with a long single manuscript inside. They are intrigued. Paterson finds the exhibition signs first and says, 'It is the original manuscript of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*.'

Lawson looks at the many sheets of tracing paper that have been taped together to form the scroll, enabling the author to write the whole book without pausing to change paper, or even stop to create new paragraphs, completing it in a three-week writing frenzy.

Of course they bend forward to read it. To feel it.

Lawson sees a card on the edge of the exhibition case that says the manuscript was in fact rejected and had to be rewritten extensively before it was accepted for publication. That single fact stabs his insides more than any of the sharp intrusive medical instruments he had seen at the Wellcome Trust Exhibition. 'What crushing heart-ache that must have been,' he says. Paterson glances up at him, but then continues reading the manuscript. 'Think about how it felt,' says Lawson, 'to have been convinced that he had captured some essence of the era, but was then told – No! That pure fire of the original words didn't burn! Can you imagine it?'

Paterson has never been much of a fan of Lawson's poetic turns of phrase, but finds that he has nothing better he can say himself other than, 'It says here that it has now been published in its original form. He'd be happy about that.'

Lawson grunts and keeps walking down the scroll, reading snatches of text here and there, noting how few corrections there are. The two men reach the end of the scroll together to find that it is longer even than the display case, with a significant amount of it still rolled up at the end.

‘That’s disappointing,’ says Paterson.

‘A trick to make us want to buy the book,’ says Lawson.

Paterson tuts in admonition.

The two men look up and see they have ended up near a door that beckons them closer with the seductive name of Treasures Room.

Lawson walks towards it.

‘Do you think that’s wise?’ asks Paterson.

‘Probably not,’ says Lawson and heads inside. Paterson tuts again and follows him.

And it really is a Treasure Room. There is so much beauty around them that their breaths catch in their mouths, and for once and they can hardly talk. They are surrounded by glass cases with manuscripts from Shakespeare and Dickens and Chaucer. Such wondrous words in the author’s own hands. There is a Guttenberg Bible. The Magna Carta. Shakespeare’s folios. All on the other side of the looking glass from them. Lawson has tears welling in his eyes.

Paterson is finding it hard to breathe. He has to leave before his heart constricts into his chest. But he only gets as far as the bookshop. There is an exhibition of many different volumes of Kerouac’s *On the Road* there. So many different editions. He picks up a copy of both the original and revised texts, and looks at them closely, and turns to read the last pages of each – looking for what was hidden from him. There is a note to say that the last few feet of the scroll manuscript are actually missing, and Kerouac claimed the old excuse of them being eaten by a dog, which he names Potchky.

So instead he reads aloud from the end of the revised text, presuming it might be fairly similar to the original, but knowing that second drafts of life are usually radically different: “The evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old...”

He thinks it brilliant. Thinks it a treasure too.

He is about to buy both books when Henry stumbles up to him and grabs hold of his arm for support. He has stayed too long in the Treasures Room and clutches his chest like a diver who has come up too fast. ‘What are you doing?’ he asks accusingly.

Paterson says nothing and puts the books back on the shelf. ‘Remember our pact,’ says Lawson. ‘Not a penny more for that bitch.’

Paterson looks longingly into the shop, trying to resist its siren call. He wants to just look around quickly and see if any of his books might be there – but he knows they won’t be. Knows how miserable that will make him feel. He follows Henry back outside and they continue up the street to Kings Cross Station.

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The tube is crowded and the two men stand, swaying like sailors out on a deck during a wild storm. Lawson sees the distant look in Paterson’s eyes and says, ‘Resist the metaphor!’ Paterson nods his head and looks around at the people all about them. Some are reading newspapers. Some are scanning electronic devices. He wonders how many are serious readers, not just commuters passing the time?

They emerge at the Embankment Station where they have planned to walk along the river, but they quickly become lost in the tangle of streets off the Monopoly board. Before they can orient themselves they are in the West End, surrounded by billboards advertising shows.

‘The last time I was in London I found it more enjoyable,’ Lawson says. Though Paterson knows this is his second draft of history, since his time there, vainly chasing literary success, was so torturous and catastrophic that it led to his then wife Bertha being admitted to an asylum.

Lawson turns now and looks over his shoulder, staring intently into the crowd, as if somebody is following them. ‘What is it?’ asks Paterson, presuming it is the reality of the past catching up on him.

‘I think she might have followed us,’ he says. ‘Let’s keep out of sight, and go and see a show.’

Paterson quickly agrees. They find the top musicals like *Mamma Mia* and the *Lion King* are all booked out for that evening, but the lady in the little ticket booth tells them they can still get tickets to a one-man show by actor Simon Callow doing readings from Charles Dickens. With a blank face Paterson orders two tickets to Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*. It is celebrating its 60th anniversary. More importantly though, Agatha’s books never got his blood pumping.

Neither does the play and he likes that. The two men are perched up high on the top tier, watching the murder play of manners, as suspicion moves from character to character. ‘This is just how she must have imagined it,’ says Lawson. ‘Looking down on the action from above like this.’

‘Shhhh,’ says Paterson, who wonders if he’d written a murder mystery or two, might any of his works be celebrating 60 years of continuous reading, ‘She’ll hear you.’

They make their way back to their apartment that evening safely, and Paterson is looking out again onto the park. He is wishing the two young lovers were still there, and watches people coming and going, walking silently along the curved street past the rows of white doors and railings. He is wondering what is going on in each of their heads, whether they are enduring love or just daydreaming, when he is filled with a sudden giddy feeling. Lawson watches him nearly topple over.

‘Are you alright?’ he asks.

'I had a terrible feeling for a moment that we'd slipped into an Ian McEwan novel,' Paterson says.

Lawson's eyes go wide.

'What should we do?' Paterson asks, looking quite desperate.

'I'd leave the country to escape being in a McEwan novel,' he says.

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Next morning the two men are sitting in St Pancras International Station with their tickets to France in their hands. They have both observed that the bookshop there has copies of *On the Road* on prominent display, and wordlessly they move to the far end of the waiting hall.

Paterson is intrigued by the number of ladies reading ebooks.

'They're not actual books!' says Lawson.

'They look like books,' says Paterson. 'And they are reading them like they're books.'

'Trust me,' says Lawson. 'I asked a lady if I could look at hers once. It was all about being tied up and having furious sexual relations.'

That sounds like a few books that Paterson has sometimes wished he had written, but he nods his head and solemnly says, 'I see.'

The two men sit quietly for some time, looking up at the station clock. Lawson then sees Paterson's eyes drop and start roaming across the passengers around them. 'I can see what you're doing,' Lawson cautions. 'You're imagining their stories, aren't you.'

Paterson, who in fact had been imagining how some of the young ladies might tie him up and have furious sexual relations with him, says, 'Yes. You're right. Sorry.' And both men look back up at the clock again.

They soon board the train, along with the many passengers with their ebooks, and find their seats.

'Well, this is comfortable,' says Paterson.

'It'd be a sight more comfortable if they had a dining car on the train with a bar,' says Lawson.

'There's bound to be plenty in Paris,' says Paterson, 'And it's only a three hour trip or so.'

'That's at least six beers,' grumbles Lawson and he leans back and closes his eyes.

Paterson had been quite excited about taking the cross-channel tunnel, but finds it altogether a disappointment. One moment they are zooming through the English countryside, and then suddenly they are in a dark tunnel and then, some time later, they are suddenly out of it. He isn't even sure they are in France until he sees road signs in French. '*Sur le route,*' he mumbles in his imperfect French.

Lawson suddenly sits up, as if the light outside the window has woken him. 'Where are we?' he asks.

'France,' says Paterson, rhyming it with aunts.

'France!' says Lawson, rhyming it with pants. 'Did I miss the tunnel? How was it?'

'Spectacular!'

'Damn!' says Lawson.

'Never mind,' says Paterson. 'You can compare the reality with your imagining on the return trip.'

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About 40 minutes later the train arrives at Gare du Nord in Paris. Lawson and Paterson let the crowd carry them out into the station. It is large and confusing and dirty. The first conversation they have with a French person is at the Bureau de Change, which doesn't go well after Lawson calls the man a 'Froggy toad' and accuses him of short-changing them when they exchange their Pounds for Euros.

Paterson draws him away and is more successful at finding them a hotel at the tourist information booth.

Using their 'damned Froggy money' they negotiate the Metro and emerge at the Odeon station near the Latin Quarter. Lawson sees they are standing on the boulevard St Germain, and his demeanour changes at once. 'This is where Joyce and Hemingway used to drink,' he says. 'Where Hemingway wrote that you expect to be sad in the fall in Paris.'

'Then let's not fall,' says Paterson, guiding Henry Lawson around a large dog turd on the pavement.

The two men continue walking down the wet street and looking into the cafes. They are full of Parisians and probably some tourists. Who can tell. Paterson is breathing in the scent of everything, taking in the sights and sounds and the whole damned heady Parisness of it all. 'Don't walk so fast,' he says. 'I want to get a taste of this Parisian essence.'

Lawson pulls a face. He is finding the city all terribly foreign. But then he sees their tribe! A young woman sitting at a small cafe table, typing frantically on her notebook computer. A man nursing a coffee and a well-thumbed novel. A middle-aged woman taking notes about bondage. Paterson sees the wide smile of recognition on his face and warns him, 'Come away. Concentrate on dodging the dog shit on the streets.'

So the two men pound the damp pavements, until they find their hotel down a dark side street. The little misshapen man at the reception leads them up the creaking carpeted stairs, past several

red doors to their room. Paterson looks in and then looks to Lawson, knowing he is going to get the blame for this. 'Perfect,' he says.

Lawson steps in and looks around, noting that the room is so small that the toilet and the shower are in a cupboard.

'How is this perfect?' Lawson asks.

'Because it is clearly nothing like an Ian McEwan novel,' says Paterson.

Sharing the small bed for a late afternoon nap, they can hear the sounds of a young girl talking to her mother somewhere. The voices wind around the hard walls of the alleyway outside and float in the window. Like a clause looking for a conjunctive phrase, thinks Paterson. The girl is sobbing about something, and he imagines she has a broken heart. She must be a writer too, he thinks.

He dozes and wakes up staring at the dark wooden bare ceiling beams above him, filled with an idea for a story of Napoleon returning to Paris in modern times. Nobody recognises him though, and he wanders the streets searching for his past. He finds this hotel room, smaller than his prison on the isle of St Helena. He trudges up the creaking carpeted stairs on tired feet, after a long day of walking the streets and riding the metro, heavy with the despondency of being so forgotten.

He looks across at Lawson who he finds is staring at him. 'Penny for your thoughts,' Lawson says.

'Just nonsense things,' he says.

It is getting late so the two men go for a walk along the banks of the Seine, armed with a tourist brochure of the best museums to see. They had hoped to see boats beating against the current,

borne back ceaselessly into the past – but the river is empty. They wonder at the large locked green metal boxes mounted all along the walls by the edge of the river. But then they come to one that is open and see the boxes open out to become book stalls. They are all full of books! The discovery makes them smile as if they had found them all selling spring flowers in bloom.

Their smiles disappear though when the Musée d’Orsay shuts its doors on them as they arrive. They ask the guard what time the Louvre will be open until and are told it is shut now too. They glare at the guard as if he has personally closed all the museums of Paris, just to spite them, and they turn and walk back along the river, glaring at the closed book stalls too, until they come to the Pont des Arts bridge. It is covered in padlocks put there by lovers who have written their names on them. There are thousands of them!

They watch one couple clip a lock onto the bridge and then throw the keys into the river and take a picture of themselves standing there hugging. Other tourists are walking up and down photographing the locks.

‘Let’s just stand here a while,’ says Lawson. ‘To see if any of the betrayed and heart-broken will come along and unlock their lock and cast it into the river.’

But nobody does.

‘Perhaps we should start the trend then,’ says Paterson. ‘Let’s buy a lock and write the name of that bitch muse Literature on it and cast it into the river.’

The two men laugh at the idea. Really laugh. They haven’t shared a moment - really shared an enjoyable moment - until now. ‘Let me buy you a drink,’ says Lawson, but the café he leads them to turns out to be a bookshop. There are more copies of *On the Road* there. Paterson picks up a French edition and then puts it back. ‘We should throw this bloody thing into the river too,’ he says.

They cross the street and walk on. A light existential rain begins to fall on them. They dash to the nearest shop. Of course it is another bloody bookshop! Lawson recognises it at once. Shakespeare and Co! It is another treasure room. The bookshop where Hemingway and Joyce hung out. The holy Mecca for young writers coming to Paris.

There are crowded shambolic shelves of books, books, books. New and old and English and French and smells of aged paper and dreams and home. Lawson recalls that he has read somewhere that writers are able to sleep over at the bookshop if they have no accommodation in Paris. It would be an opium den, he thinks, and one would never want to leave.

There are more copies of *On the Road* near the front door, of course, next to Hemingway's memoirs of his time in Paris, *A Moveable Feast*. They watch the young Americans and Irish and Spanish and English pilgrims who tip-toe around the winding stacks in silent awe. They know the looks on their faces only too well. That addiction. That longing. That familiar pain.

They step inside, deeper into the shop, and then go up the stairs, past the iconic sign that cautions 'be not inhospitable to strangers lest they be angels in disguise'. There is a poetry reading in the front library room. Paterson leans on a shelf and Lawson sits down in an old leather chair to listen. The words are read like they were written, as cries of fury and passion.

Paterson says what they both feel, in a soft whisper, 'It's too perfect, isn't it.' Lawson nods his head. 'We've stepped into a story, haven't we.' Then they turn their heads as a fat guy comes up the stairs, and they can see how he is trying not to burst apart. He sits down opposite them and closes his eyes, like he is trying to suck it all up. Like he is trying to feel a touch of Hemingway or Joyce or Scott-Fitzgerald. As if you could really channel them into yourself. All the wanting and longing and desire not just to write, but to be published and recognised and read by these people.

The poor bastard!

Lawson is possessed by a sudden desire to jump up and shout at everyone to get out while they still can. He wants to warn them all that she will break their hearts and ruin them. And that she will never love them a fraction as much as they love her. But Paterson puts a calming hand on his shoulder, and leads him away from the emotive poetry and the anguished fat guy, and they go into the back room where a young French woman is playing the piano.

The two men squeeze in alongside the small crowd. Books behind them and the music before them. Her voice is a lovely, lilting French, and Paterson imagines her face is as lovely - though her back is to them. 'We should fall in love with somebody like this,' he whispers to Lawson.

‘Somebody real.’ He imagines she might be tempestuous and moody and passionate – and may or may not like bondage – but she would never be as cruel to them as their literary mistress has been.

Lawson wants to agree with him. Wants to stay until this lovely young lady has finished playing, and turns around towards them, to see if his imagining compares to reality. But instead he says, ‘Let’s go!’ He grabs hold of his friend’s arm. ‘Let’s go and find a café where they serve good cold beer and nobody is interested in books, and if the bitch of a muse walks past, hell – even if Kerouac walks by with her on his arm, pontificating on the need to understand the nature of travelling to understand the world – we’ll ignore her as if we’ve just finished writing the last paragraph of the last story we’ll ever write, and she’ll never torment us again.’

‘Yes,’ says Paterson. ‘Not even if she says yes she will. Yes.’

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