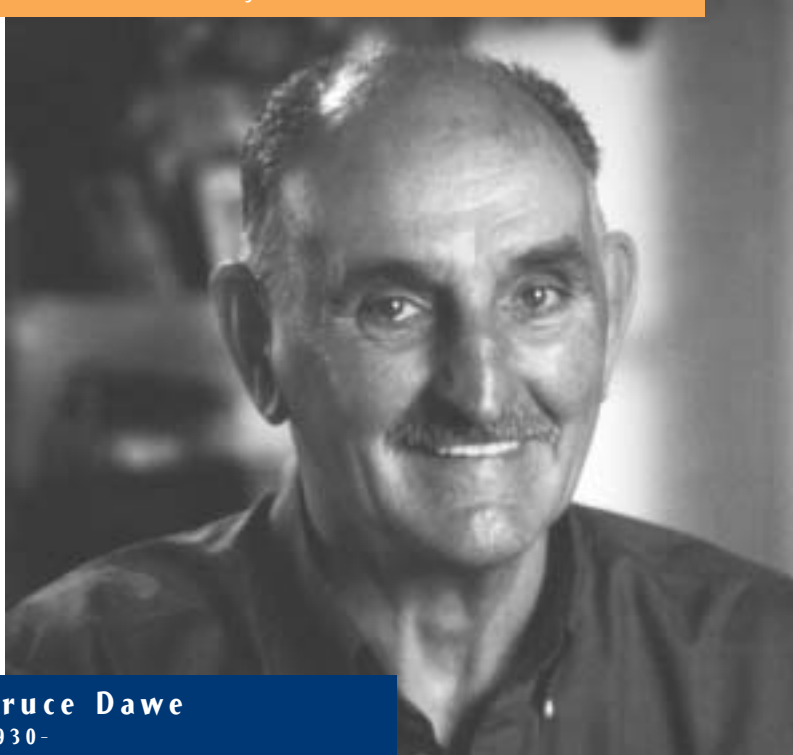


AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Bruce Dawe

1930-
Poet

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 6 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Bruce Dawe

Directors/Producers Robin Hughes, Linda Kruger

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SYNOPSIS

One of the biggest selling and most highly regarded of Australian poets, Bruce Dawe, 'The Poet of Suburbia', lives an unconventionally conventional life. He grew up in a household where his father, a farm labourer, was often unemployed and often absent from home. His rather eccentric mother longed for the kind of stability and success in life that circumstances always denied her.

Dawe drifted through his early years showing promise as a writer but finding little direction for his life. The variety of his many occupations—labourer, postman, university failure, air force officer, father and teacher—has served to give Dawe extraordinary empathy with people from all backgrounds, which characterises his poetry and gives a voice to so-called ordinary Australians.

This encounter with Bruce Dawe allows us an insight into the motivation and methods of a very fine poet whose ability to express the drama and beauty of everyday life has made his work readily accessible to the general public.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Lines of thought and questions within this study guide will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Literature, Studies of Society and Environment, Society and Culture and Australian History.

BEFORE WATCHING

You will be better prepared for the program's content if you research some areas that impacted greatly on Bruce Dawe's life.

The Great Depression

Bruce Dawe was born in 1930 and this coincides with one of Australia's darkest years. The Great Depression, marked by the collapse of Wall Street in 1929, saw a terrible and extended slump in all business activity.

From 1929 to 1932, industrial production in the capitalist world fell by 35 per cent, the volume of world trade fell by more than 40 per cent and unemployment rose to 30 million in 1932 in the four major capitalist economies. This negative cycle feeds on itself, whereby unemployment rises and thus spending falls. Australia was particularly vulnerable at that time because of our then reliance on wheat and wool exports. Other countries could not afford to buy our commodities because of their own economic woes. In 1932, 29 per cent of Australian men were unemployed and although the figures improved a little in the following years, our nation was just recovering when, in 1939, World War Two broke out.

- How would you feel, as the 'man of the family', i.e. the sole breadwinner, if you'd been unable to provide for your wife and four children? Remember, a woman in paid employment was a rarity. Married women were precluded from the workforce.
- Look at the positives and the negatives for women and children in the Great Depression. What would they have lacked? Include material objects as well as emotional and spiritual poverty. Within these three areas, what benefits could have resulted from such unwanted but imposed conditions?

Vietnam War Protests

The Vietnam War was fought in the 1960s and early 1970s. The United States of America and its allies (New Zealand, Australia and South Korea) supported South Vietnam against communist insurgents and their North Vietnam comrades. Australia conscripted civilians in 1964 and together with the nation's regular army, they fought at Nui Dat, Phuoc Tuy province, Long Tan and in other key locations. As in the USA, many citizens of Australia believed this was not their war, and thus, in 1970, anti-Vietnam War moratorium marches began to be held in most capital cities. The people won and by Christmas 1972 the war was all but over.

WHILE WATCHING

As you watch the program, list words or short phrases to describe Dawe, and make notes about the degree to which you think he is representative of the Australian identity.

INFLUENCES ON BRUCE DAWE'S LIFE

The focus of this program is the life of an Australian who has 'made a difference' through his observing and recording of large parts of our life. (Dawe was awarded the Order of Australia in 1992 for his contribution to Australian literature). All poets' experiences invariably emerge in their work. For Dawe, this is particularly so because his work is based on the familiarity of everyday occurrences.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Although Bruce was only a child when the Great Depression ravaged the country, many of his experiences from those years militated on his later life.

- To what extent do you think his father's erratic employment set the model for Bruce's 'whole succession of jobs'—lawyer's office clerk, labourer, handyman gardener, postman, teacher, RAAF recruit? Look at each of these jobs and discuss how each of them could have influenced his style of writing poetry.
- Are there parts of your life that exist merely because you have followed your parents' way? Do you believe that parents have a responsibility to set a sustainable lifestyle example for their children?
- Was Bruce's father being irresponsible in drifting from job to job, or was he a product of his circumstances?

As a child, Bruce moved from place to place a lot. As a man, he lived in several cities on Australia's east coast (Melbourne, Sydney, Toowoomba).

- Could it be that this wanderlust was established early in his life?
- Does it emerge in any of his poetry?

SPOTLIGHT ON POETRY—DRIFTERS

This poem, and all others Bruce Dawe reads in the program, is taken from the collection **Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems**. In 1984, the National Book Council of Australia nominated the anthology as one of the ten finest national publications of the preceding decade.

The poem 'Drifters' sums up each of the family's feelings in moving on yet again, and captures the dwindling vitality of the wife who dreams of a stability which never comes.

- What does the title of the anthology, **Sometimes Gladness**, suggest to you?
- What emotions do you hear in the final line of the poem where the woman holds out the berries and says, 'Make a wish, Tom. Make a wish'?
- What is the significance of the newness of the family's arrival and the newness of the berries?
- How does the order of events in the poem's structure create inevitability?
- Quote some lines that show the mother's need to put down some real roots.
- Why does his mother pick all the green tomatoes from the vine?
- Why is the first thing she puts on the trailer the 'bottling set she never unpacked...'?
- How is the mood set by the poem's opening words, 'One day soon'?
- What is contributed by the actual speech 'truly'?
- How does the archival footage during the poem's reading enhance your understanding? Deal with two specifics.

FAMILY

The Dawe family was unusual: conventional in the context of the early part of the 20th century, but not cohesive. Consider how the following factors influenced Dawe's life:

- His father was often in a 'disagreeable sort of mood' which made things tense around home.
- Although Bruce was the youngest of four children, he was 'twenty plus years younger than [his] brother and sisters'. Thus he didn't experience sibling rivalry.
- His mother was ambitious for him. He was the only one to go to high school.
- His memory is that his brother didn't spend his earnings on himself, yet he is unsure about what his father did with the limited money he had.
- The hope that the family invested in him as 'a clever young fellow'.
- His admiration for the younger of his two older sisters who had some poems published in the Herald newspaper.

SPOTLIGHT ON POETRY—LITTLE RED FOX

In the poem 'Drifters', the focus was on Dawe's mother, but in 'Little Red Fox', it is on his father. Again, the subject matter is everyday and familiar: we are given a portrait of how the writer remembers his father. A big issue of the poem—that the spirit of a wild thing is so easily broken—recurs in several of his later poems.

- What is the point of redefining the word 'dad' into the pronoun 'he' in the opening line of the poem?
- Choose two specific details about the persona's dad and say what they add to the poem.
- Find some details that elicit the feeling that reality was too hard to bear, but there was always hope in what might be. Think back to aspects of Dawe's own life revealed in the program where the future provided a reason to go on. Why is hope an important emotion for every human being?

- For whom is the 'little red fox cub' a metaphor? Explain how the comparison works.
- Before you saw this video and when you first read Dawe's description of his father as 'handsome', did you imagine him as the photograph shows him to be?
- Is the contrast of a tough man living alone 'in a shed' with one who 'wept...broke down' effective in conveying the poem's theme?

EDUCATION

There are many points of formal education in Dawe's life and they seem to be turning points for him. Trace each of the following events as bringing new opportunities. From clues in the film, speculate on how they contributed to his need to write poetry, his enjoyment of doing so and his style.

- He dropped out of high school before finishing. He had a 'difference of agreement' with his maths teacher.
- 'I went to night school. I did matric.' But he was 'tempted quite often to leave the studying at night school'.
- He went to Melbourne University in the 1950s, but again dropped out.
- After his RAAF service, he completed his degree and became a teacher of English Literature at both college and university levels.

RAAF

Dawe says he joined the services because he 'wanted companionship more than anything...'. Look at the emergent events below and speculate on their importance to him personally and to Australia's growth as a country.

- His wife-to-be was also a member of the forces.
- His voice of protest against the Vietnam War carried weight.
- He 'was winning a few prizes' whilst in the RAAF.

SPOTLIGHT ON POETRY —WEAPONS TRAINING

This poem highlights the regimentation and humiliation dished out during defence training.

- Who is speaking?
- Why is the language clipped, the tone condescending?
- What concepts do you consider demeaning to the soldiers and is the speaker's choice of language acceptable in either the armed forces or in civilian life? Why has Dawe written in this way?
- What is the point of this poem? What is its context?
- Does the opening line set the tone for the poem? How effective are the onomatopoeic words 'click' and 'pitter-patter'?

SPOTLIGHT ON POETRY—HOMECOMING

This poem records the sickening waste of life which resulted from the Vietnam war.

- Why is the title ironic?
- Choose three evoked images; explore their depth and how Dawe gives them life.
- Find examples of repetition and comment on their effectiveness.

- Why do Dawe's lists in the poem make such strong statements?
- What does the use of 'ing' words throughout the poem achieve?
- Why do the 'coasts wing upward'?
- What makes this such an effective anti-war poem?
- What do you make of the final words, '...too late, too early'?

BRUCE DAWE—THE MAN

We can gain insight into people by their words and actions. Dawe describes himself as having a 'working class background'. What does each of the following situations reveal about Dawe's attitude to life?

- Whilst living with his mother: 'It's either me or the Pokes'. She chose the dogs, and he left the following morning.
- Whilst at university: '...they [other writers] were universally magnanimous, universally generous'.
- Reflecting on his marriage: '...there's nothing to say that I deserved any better than lots of other people'.
- About his university failure: 'I was undisciplined...[it] forced me to...think more consecutively'.
- About writing methods: '...sitting at the dining room table...the television's usually on...nobody ever got shushed...poetry is a sort of common daily activity'.
- On poetry: 'So life comes first, art comes second'.
- On not being heard of: 'it never dismays me...suits me fine'.

How does knowing the poet better translate into understanding his work more fully?

SPOTLIGHT ON POETRY—GOING

Dawe greatly loved and respected his mother-in-law. 'Going' captures the moment of her death.

- Choose two images that contribute to the happy tone of the poem and explain the reasons why Dawe created this atmosphere.
- Choose a contrasting image and examine how it contributes to the poem's meaning.
- What do the personal details add to the poem? Explain at least two such details.
- Do you agree that the language Dawe selects is almost not chosen at all, but seems like an everyday speaking voice? What then does the language contribute and can the poem be said to be crafted?

CULTURAL IDENTITY

Every country has an identity, born of its culture. This set of practices, beliefs and values operating within a community provides social organization. The way an individual identifies with these ideologies means he/she either affirms certain cultural 'norms', or repudiates them.

- Draw up a three column table and head the columns as 'affirm', 'challenge' and 'evidence'. List those facets of Australian culture that Dawe identifies with and those he does not. Finally, make sure you bring evidence from his work to support your views.
- The 'Australianness' of **Sometimes Gladness** is said to be its key. Do you agree that Bruce Dawe's verse makes us know more fully what it is to be Australian?

- Do you believe the notion of being Australian has changed since Dawe wrote the poems included in **Sometimes Gladness**? Explore your answer by bringing evidence of the differences between then and now.

SPOTLIGHT ON POETRY— HOMO SUBURBIENSIS

'Homo Suburbienis' has been described as 'an anthem to the everyday man.' It reiterates through imagery Dawe's words, 'I don't believe...that suburbia's just full of crummy little people...':

- What thoughts does the title bring into focus? Can you explain its irony?
- Explain the effectiveness of contrasting 'constant' and 'variables' to open the poem.
- Why does Dawe write about a group of people using just one 'man alone'?
- What strikes you about those states a '...man can offer'? Look at them firstly as a group, then individually.
- Comment on the strength of the everyday details such as a 'compost box' or 'rubbish burning'.
- Why is it appropriate for the program to end with this poem?

CONCLUSION

This program about an Australian who has contributed in mammoth proportions to the enjoyment of poetry by ordinary people ends in a way in which Dawe would likely approve. We hear a dog barking, a car revving, the sound of traffic. The visuals show us the poet walking through his gate and into his house. It is the action of everyman, a comfortable action, a shared action, a coming home.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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