

## THE GENESIS OF A NEW VOICE: EARLY AUSTRALIAN POETRY

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It is difficult to say just where "AUSTRALIAN" poetry begins due to a number of facts both historical, geographical and literary. One could historically place its birth with the first lines to be written on Australian soil, but this would be neither "Australian" poetry nor a literary truth. And anyway what exactly do we mean when we use the terms English, American, Australian poetry? What is it that makes the poetry of a particular nation that nation's poetry?

It would be totally limiting to consider Australian poetry to be those works in which we can detect a patently Australian landscape. As a critic once said, a poem populated by kangaroos, emus, gum-trees and other exotic fauna and flora does not constitute Australian poetry. I understand by the term Australian poetry, Australian literature, that voice which is recognisable as the voice of the individual, of the self speaking from the reality of Australia to the world at large. A voice which expresses both the universal and the personal in a distinctly individual way. Obviously, given this definition the early Australian poets were at a disadvantage for they had not only to struggle to understand a new reality, but they had also to create a poetic vehicle with which to do so. It became necessary to prune the poetic diction prevalent in England imported into Australia so that it would serve as a means in the first instance for reflecting an outer reality in a plastic form, and in the second instance it had to become a means of reflecting both an inner and outer reality. The fact that the inner reality might not correspond with the outer is not the struggle of the Australian people in particular, but that of each individual born into the world. In Australia however this universal struggle was aggravated by a geographical, historical and literary reality.

The wealth of the "inherited" English poetic tradition understandably loomed large in the development of the early voices of colonial poets. It formed part of their cultural background and in the early days was the only "home" source on which these writers could draw. The problem was how to adapt such traditions to the new reality in which the poets and their readers moved. A new perspective and diction

had to be found to communicate a new and startling reality. Points of view not locally formed rapidly became untenable and the colonial poet had to free himself from the inherited poetic diction which was still looked upon as being "the way to write". The description of Australian landscape in Wordsworthian or Tennysonian terms merely resulted in something akin to an English garden inhabited by exotic fauna and flora. As Judith Wright points out, contingent to the emergence of the individual Australian voice was the assimilation and understanding of the environment and:

The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures. <sup>1</sup>

The works of three early poets, Harpur, Lawson and Kendall would exemplify Judith Wright's point well, preoccupied as they are with coming to grips with the landscape and the individual's response to it.

As we have begun to see, the pull of England as homeland had effects on the growth and development of a distinctive, authentic Australian voice. Any work published was inevitably both influenced and judged by English canons of what was acceptable and indeed the cultural dominance of England was crippling. Even the language itself could constitute an impediment in the early poet's struggle to depict the alien landscape of Australia:

Co-evolution of language and landscape is a subtle process and the language the colonisers brought with them offered few words or appropriate concepts to apply to an immense barren island at the end of the Earth, home of stone-age tribes and of a second and separate marsupial creation, where only the thin run, varying from tropical rain forest to alpine heath was fertile. <sup>2</sup>

Brian Elliot points to the intricate complexities involved in the emergence of Australian poetry underlining the early poets dual function as both literary pioneers and colonists establishing a homeland:

The growth of a poetic tradition in a new country is as interesting to watch as the progress of a plant—a tree perhaps, that springs from a windborn seed, takes root, finds water, sends out shoots and in its own time reaches the sky. Many forces influence and control its growth—physical, psychological, conventional, and, inevitably, historical. In the nineteenth century, landscape was a preoccupation of poetry everywhere, but in Australia it did much more than reflect a fashionable trend abroad. It was not merely a romantic impulse that fed this Australian concern with "country". The poets were pioneers: they sought a vision, but they sought a homeland too. They were looking for their own country. <sup>3</sup>

In order for the tree of Australian poetry to grow, in order for its foliage to be recognised as distinct from elm and oak, it must first root firmly in the land, drawing from all sources of nutrients both local and imported, until it acquires its own distinctive colouring; until a new species of tree comes into its own.

The early Australian writer was both artificer and observer of history and literature in a land which was unknown to many and alien to himself. The importance of landscape, Nature, is evident. It is the land we live in which moulds our temperaments and with which we and our ancestors have established lasting ties, the latter handing on to us ancient traditions attached to the land and natural world as part of our heritage: in Australia, however, the textbook of tradition and heritage had still to be written.

The nineteenth century critic Marcus Clarke pointed to the interaction of landscape and literature when he associated the tone of melancholy detectable in Australian writing with the external reality, and believed that it was possible not only to come to terms with its strangeness but also for it to become a fount of inspiration for the poet. However, Clarke's "dweller in the wilderness"<sup>4</sup> at one with the landscape around him, was not a familiar figure and certainly did not include many of the early poets. The nature of the land and the historical circumstances surrounding the colonisation of Australia turned the first decades into a battle for survival and little else. The early settlers were of British stock. Their ways were the ways of England, in many aspects the ways of Europe and they saw Australia through European eyes giving rise to a centrifugal pull away from Australia towards England as the home with which they identified. The hardship of the struggle on the land together with this gravitational pull gave rise to what may be termed a "split-consciousness" which Judith Wright has aptly defined as: "the inner argument between the transplanted European and his new country". For long years all Australian literary production was held up to comparison with accepted canons across the world in England and there was a shrinking away from, or to use A.A. Phillips' term a cultural cringing away from, anything which might appear too Australian in tone<sup>5</sup>. But as Phillips himself says, such comparisons are by nature erroneous:

It is absurd to feel apologetic towards SUCH IS LIFE or COOARDOO or MELBOURNE ODES because they would not seem quite right to an English reader; it is part of their distinctive virtue that no Englishman can fully understand them.<sup>6</sup>

In an article titled "The Upside-down hut", published in 1961, Judith Wright points out the dual problem of coming to terms with the land, accepting it as home, and of finding a distinctive voice which will adequately express the individual's relationship with it:

Australia is still, for us, not a country but a state—or states—of mind. We do not speak from within her, but from the outside; from the state of mind that describes, rather than expresses, its surroundings, or from the state of mind that imposes itself upon, rather than lives through, landscape and events... For we are the Antipodes, the Opposites, the Under-dogs. We still live in a hut, that's upside down. Only now, gradually, is the love-hate relationship we have with this country beginning to come clear to us. Someday we will be able to think of Europe as *our* Antipodes. Only then will the theme of exile, sacrifice, hope be finally worked out and our house be right upside at last. <sup>7</sup>

It is only through identification with the land, with the rhythms and processes of it that the individual can find his roots and acquire a sense of belonging and the writer evolve a personal and differentiated identity that will enable him to write with a distinctive and valuable voice.

Where then does Australian poetry as such begin? I think we shall find that the indications of the emergence of a true individual and distinctive voice are visible for the first time in the works of Harpur and Kendall, even if their works often ring with English Romantic and Victorian overtones.

Much of Harpur's work is indebted to Wordsworth, Shelley and Milton and even Clare. Certainly the "home" voice is clearly strong in his work. However, one feels as one reads his work that here for the first time is an attempt at something different. There is an attempt to reflect the environment and the individual's relationship to it in a genuinely individual way. The poet makes the reader aware, albeit in a diction which is clearly European, that we are reading about an environment which is different, distinct. The persona in Harpur's poetry is at odds with the external reality and while there are overtones of fear and incomprehension in his attitude to the forests and mountains among which he moves, there is also an undertone of open admiration and awe for the splendour and majesty of the land. His poetry is not the description of the landscape as such, but rather there is a genuine attempt to use the landscape as a means by which to reflect the poet's relationship with it. More often than not the voice we hear is distinctly Wordsworthian in tone, but at times one is conscious that Harpur

...captured for the first time the atmosphere of the Australian bush, particularly its play of light, breathless heat, stillness and solitude. <sup>8</sup>

It is with Harpur that we get glimpses of the bush as distinct from the "domesticated" English countryside. We find in his work elements that are later to become characteristic of much Australian verse; the dominant preoccupation with landscape, lines imbued with a feeling of "immense searching distance" <sup>9</sup>, as the poet attempts to reconcile and adapt the existing idiom to the new environment. Kenneth Slessor points to the line "The sylvan eyelash always of remote Australian waters", a description of the swamp-oaks reaching down to the edge of the water from "The Creek of the Four Graves" <sup>10</sup>, as the first true indication we have of the



emergence of a distinct voice. Certainly the "sylvan eyelash" in this context constitutes a rich image springing from an understanding and keen observation of the landscape. Although the poem is overloaded with Romantic stereotypes, the feeling of vastness coupled with a sombre, brooding melancholy is one which will later inform much Australian poetry.

In "The Cloud" Harpur tries to set the Australian scene in terms of aridity and burnt colours: "The sun-parched hills all brown and dry"<sup>11</sup>, but the poem is, in general terms, couched in Romantic clichés. What makes the poem ring differently is, yet again, the feeling of immensity, the play of light in the description and the attempt to internalise the storm. The question of light in Australian poetry is an interesting one. To the northern European reader, the quality of light in all its variants is striking and one not generally detectable in English poetry. The quality of light present in Australian verse is akin to that present in much of the verse from countries bordering the Mediterranean. It is a light of clarity and brilliance contrasting with subtle shadows and innuendoes of colour and leads to even the simplest of objects being seen in a different way. Donovan Clarke says of Harpur's use of light,

The light is in constant play, the clouds move, the sun rises, seethes or sets, stars twinkle or fade, trees climb and so on.<sup>12</sup>

The last poem to be looked at by Harpur is "A Midsummer Noon in an Australian Forest"<sup>13</sup> which Prof. Heseltine sees as making "a definite contribution to the direction and pattern of our poetic history"<sup>14</sup>. The whole poem is pervaded by a blinding glare of hot light, and this, coupled with the feeling of space operating on the opposing horizontal planes of land and sky gives the poem its distinctive quality. The world sleeps or lazes in the heat; above, the sky blazes its summer fire and the only moving creature is the minute dragon-hornet. Surely the theme of midsummer noon must be considered unusual and perhaps even distinctly Australian for, as Noel Macanish points out, the mid-day theme is extremely rare even in the hotter climate zones of Europe?<sup>15</sup> One has the feeling that what lies asleep and lethargic at noon is much more than a small area of landscape; it is the continent itself, deeply submerged in its ancient dream. Part of the feeling of vastness is due not just to the geographical enormity of the land, but to the geological antiquity of the continent itself, lying submerged and undiscovered at noon.

It is, then, with Harpur that we have an attempt to picture the Australian landscape and experience by adapting the traditional idiom to a new reality. Though he remained trapped for the most part within this idiom he nonetheless made a valuable contribution to the development of Australian verse.

Henry Kendall undertook to continue Charles Harpur's work which he greatly admired. The depths of the dark valleys, the creeks of Harpur are frequently the areas of landscape he explores, and like Harpur, his too is the struggle to adapt the

existing idiom to the new reality. A feature which appears in Kendall, which is only rarely present in Harpur, is the internalisation of landscape. Certainly his descriptions of landscape are more subjective than objective and often lack the perspective of space and vastness present in Harpur. Kendall's tendency to subjectivise landscape into a representative of inner rather than outer reality leads to his poetry being peculiarly sparse in identifiably Australian fauna and flora. What becomes important in Kendall is the internalisation of landscape to reflect an emotional state in which mountain and river symbolise strength and a lost Eden to which the poet longs to return. Kendall's poetry is pervaded by his search to retrieve the lost Eden state and by the contrast between this supposed Eden and present reality. This expresses itself in the opposition between the soft, cool valleys through which water runs and the harsh, fierce burning of inland Australia.

Exile, a theme which appears time and again in Australian verse is strong in Kendall's work. Man is an outcast, a wanderer in a hellish landscape dreaming of deep, green valleys and free running water. Kendall insistently expresses a desire for coolness symbolic of his desire to unveil the mystery of creation and retrieve Eden. Man is condemned, in one way or another, to struggle through his own private desert in search of salvation, an exile state symbolised in the figure of explorers moving through inland Australia. After a mental and physical breakdown in 1872, the mountain figures largely in his work as symbolic of his return to health, and of his newly acquired strength and more importantly for his faith in himself and his world. But what of Kendall's legacy to Australian verse? Judith Wright, herself one of Australia's finest voices, has said of him:

If we ask the question whether Kendall's imagined Australia—that contrast between a remembered Eden and a present-enough Hell in which Kendall found himself struggling—issued in any real poetry or any real reconciliation between Kendall and his world; we must I think, agree that, though this violently divided landscape is Kendall's rather than ours, it has a real relevance to our literature. As for the desert scenes, with their load of guilt and suffering and penance, they may seem exaggeratedly melodramatic; but it is in Kendall that we first find stated the preoccupation that recurs in our literature with that particular theme, the "death in the desert" theme with which our painters, poets and novelists have dealt so often since.<sup>16</sup>

Harpur and Kendall constitute then the earliest attempts to reconcile the traditional idiom to the Australian environment. They may have fallen short of their goals, but they did lay the first foundations on which later poets could draw and from which they could learn the obvious lessons. Their attempt to give birth to a personal voice is really a genuine move to follow Harpur's maxim of "Be then a Bard of thy country",<sup>17</sup> and to make the creation of "thy country" possible through the communion of inner and outer reality. Australia could not be allowed to remain a "state of mind" and, in order for this to be, her poets had to speak from within her rather than from without.

Harpur and Kendall, then, stand on the rungs of a ladder of achievement that leads to the existence today of a poetic voice that is distinct, individualistic, strong and written from the heart of both Australia and the Australians

## Notas

- <sup>1</sup> Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, OUP, Melbourne, 1965, p. XI
- <sup>2</sup> Mark O'Connor, "Evolutionary Myth in the New Nature Poetry", *Meanjin Quarterly*, 2, 1981, pp. 225-223.
- <sup>3</sup> Brian Elliott, *The Landscape of Australian Poetry*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1967. Quoted on the dust cover.
- <sup>4</sup> Marcus Clarke, Quoted in Wright, Judith, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, OUP, Melbourne, 1965, p. XIII.
- <sup>5</sup> A.A. Phillips, "The Cultural Cringe", *Meanjin Quarterly*, 4, 1960. Reprinted in Christesen, C.B. (Ed); *On Native Grounds*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1968, pp. 448-451.
- <sup>6</sup> A.A. Phillips, Op. Cit. pp. 448-451.
- <sup>7</sup> Wright, Judith; "The Upside-Down Hut" in Barnes, John (Ed), *The Writer in Australia, 1856-1964*, OUP, Melbourne, 1969, pp. 204-244.
- <sup>8</sup> H.C.; Jaffa, *Kenneth Slessor: A Critical Study*, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 29.
- <sup>9</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden, Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, Anansi, Toronto, 1971, p. 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Harpur, "The Creek of the Four Graves" in Clarke, D. (Ed); *Australian Poets: Charles Harpur*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963, pp. 5-12.
- <sup>11</sup> Charles Harpur, Op. Cit. pp. 3-4.
- <sup>12</sup> Donovan Clarke, Op. Cit. pp. VIII-LX.
- <sup>13</sup> Charles Harpur, Op. Cit. pp. 33-34.
- <sup>14</sup> Harry Heseltine, *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Penguin Books, London, 1972, p. 23.
- <sup>15</sup> Noel Macanish, "Charles Harpur's 'Midsummer Noon': A Structuralist Approach", *Westerly*, 8, 4, October 1978, pp. 435-456.
- <sup>16</sup> Judith Wright, Op. Cit. p. 76.
- <sup>17</sup> Charles Harpur, "The Dream by the Mountain", Op. Cit. p. 39.