

# DESERT FATHERS



*David Wheatley*

PAUL KANE, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*.

Cambridge University Press, N.P.G.

LES MURRAY (ED.), *Fivefathers: Five Australian Poets of the pre-Academic Era*.

Carcamet, stg £9.95

JOHN KINSELLA, *The Undertow: New and Selected Poems*. Littlewood Arc,

stg £7.95

A.D. Hope's "Australia" is probably as good a place as any to start:

A Nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey  
In the field uniform of modern wars,  
Darkens her hills, those endless, outstretched paws  
Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.

They call her a young country, but they lie:  
She is the last of lands, the emptiest,  
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast  
Still tender but within the womb is dry.

Without songs, architecture, history:  
The emotions and superstitions of younger lands,  
Her rivers of water drown among inland sands,  
The river of her immense stupidity

Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth.  
In them at last the ultimate men arrive  
Whose boast is not "we live" but "we survive",  
A type who will inhabit the dying earth.

And her five cities, like five teeming sores,  
Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state  
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate  
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

The tone of this, I imagine, must come as a shock to first-time readers of Australian poetry who turn to it in search of orientation. When it was written, in 1939, the Australian state had been in existence for a century and a half and its English-language poetic tradition for slightly less, but nothing about it suggests youthfulness, promise or pride; what it gives us instead is Australia's sterility, emptiness and "immense stupidity". Hope himself (*b.1907*) on closer inspection makes an unlikely laureate of the postcolonial condition—Oxford-educated, most at home formally and temperamentally in the eighteenth century, and with the exception of the above poem not noticeably exercised by questions of national self-consciousness. In recent years Australia has found a more wholehearted (if no less complex) celebrant in Les Murray, but Hope's uneasy relationship with "the last of lands" is far from unrepresentative. As Paul Kane argues in his new study *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, ambiguity and anxiety have marked the Australian poet's response to the nation and national origins since the beginning. Scouring the anthologies, we cannot help noticing that something is missing: there is no Australian Walt Whitman, no Orphic founding father with "A Song of Myself" to hymn the nascent Australian tradition into mature self-confidence. What there is instead is the belated Romanticism of poets such as Charles Harpur (1813-1867) and Henry Kendall (1839-1892), in whom the attempt to forge a national style combines with an uneasy sense of Australia's baseness and provincialism, from which the poets despair of extracting an authentic cultural voice. Harpur began his career with high hopes of emulating his English master Wordsworth, but soon declined into Chattertonian melancholy, giving up on his philistine public "through weariness of heart". In Kendall's poem "The Muse of Australia", the dream vision of the nation is too much to bear: even when it fades away to be replaced by a lyre-bird the poet averts his eyes, since "It dazzled mine eyes [...] I turned from the place, / And wept in the dark for a glorious face, / And a hand with the Harp of Australia!" The great Australian poem refused to be written; Romanticism, in so far as it happened at all in Australia, was grounded in absence and negativity. The Romantic identification of nature with the feminine was frustrated by the empty, barren aspect of the countryside, repelling the cultivating hand of man; the penal origins of the colony counteracted the conventional Romantic equation of nature with freedom; the Romantic emphasis on originality was hamstrung by the knowledge that Australian Romanticism was itself a derivation of an earlier European movement. The would-be national tradition which Harpur, Kendall and others attempted to found never achieved critical mass: at the turn of the century we find Australian poetry sharply

divided between the populist bush ballad style of A.B. “Banjo” Paterson (1864-1941) and the esoteric Symbolist aesthetics of Christopher Brennan (1870-1932), each functioning in virtual autonomy of the other.

Needless to say, the fragmented state of Australian poetry did not help its export-value. American writing has long been in the habit of dictating terms to the colonial homeland, but historically attempts to portray Australia as a “new USA” have tended to be premature. The most likely effect of Australia thinking about itself in this way, Clive James has written, would have been to transform it into a new American state—“a new Alaska with a better climate or at most a new California with a better social security system”. The true particularity of Australia is very different. The opening stanzas of Hope’s “Australia” may be scathing, but its glorious final two are a far cry from the cultural cringe of a resigned provincial:

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home  
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find  
The Arabian desert of the human mind,  
Hoping, if still from deserts the prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare  
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes  
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes  
Which is called civilisation over there.<sup>1</sup>

What makes Australia so difficult may also be what makes it worth the effort. A waste land rather than a virgin territory, it defies the poet to find the “spirit / that escapes the learned doubt” of Europe, just as it defies its settlers to extract a living from it. Australia becomes a site of purification whose challenge Hope must meet, like a modern desert father, if he is to escape “the chatter of cultured apes” and create new values far removed from what, in its limited way, “is called civilisation over there”.

Kane’s emphasis on “negativity” allows him to construct an alternative version of Romanticism, under which the exceptionalism of Australian poetry becomes its source of strength. For the purposes of the twentieth century, Kane’s canon begins with Christopher Brennan, the eldest son of Irish Catholic immigrants whose strange mix of ’nineties *maudit* strutting and genuine proto-modernism suggests nothing so much as Francis Thompson’s “The Hound of Heaven” rewritten by Mallarmé *Igitur*. His chief volume, *Poems* (1913), is a *livre composé* describing the poet’s search for an Eden-like state of psychic integration. The failure of

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1 A.D. Hope, *Selected Poems* (Carcenet, 1986).

his quest is symbolized by Lilith, Adam's mythic mate before the creation of Eve, whose revenge for her abandonment is to destroy his capacity for contentment and so condemn him to yearn for a paradise which he will never attain. Believing as Brennan did that reality was "the union of consciousness with its object", his poetry is verbose in its laments for Brennan's sense of alienation and apartness. Self-consciousness becomes a prison, with poetry serving only to compound the poet's woes; the only possible release is a surrender to will-lessness and inaction. By the end of his career, sacked from the University of Sydney for his alcoholism and disorderly private life and reduced to the pitiful self-parody of *A Chant of Doom* (1918), inaction was no longer such a difficult option. The task of carrying through the modernisation of Australian verse begun by Brennan was to fall to younger and less inhibited writers.

Chief among these for Kane, and first of Les Murray's "fivefathers" is Kenneth Slessor (1901-1971). Misleading as American parallels may be, it is hard to read Slessor without thinking of his near-contemporary John Crowe Ransom, a poet whose qualities of sympathetic rhetoric, tenderness and affection, "wanting the light and sorry for the dark" as Randall Jarrell would say, Slessor shares in abundance. After the self-doubt of the nineteenth century, the confidence with which he takes possession of a style is a wonder to behold:

So quiet it was in that high, sun-steeped room,  
So warm and still, that sometimes with the light  
Through the great windows, bright with bottle-panes,  
There'd float a chime from clock-jacks out of sight,  
Clapping iron mallets on green copper gongs. ("Nuremberg")

His mixed Hebridean Scottish and German Jewish family background may have contributed to the cosmopolitan turn of Slessor's mind and his fascination with exploring origins; he moves easily from the German setting of "Nuremberg" and the Dutch seacoast of "The Atlas" to poems on the foundation of modern Australia, of which "Five Visions of Captain Cook" is one of his most impressive. Slessor holds out a vision of "Those other countries of the mind. / So tousled, dark and undefined!" against the compact orderliness of his Dutch cartographer's world, and salutes the heroism of Cook's great leap into the dark beyond its limits:

I've never heard  
Of sailors aching for the longitude  
Of shipwrecks before or since. It was the spell  
Of Cook did this, the phylacteries of Cook.

Men who ride broomsticks with a mesmerist  
Mock the typhoon. So, too, it was with Cook.

Kane suggests that journey trope so frequent in Slessor reflects the poet's progress from a youthful Romanticism to a more unillusioned modernist style, a terminus he perhaps overdramatises as Slessor's "nihilism". For Kane, the sonnet sequence "Out of Time" (not in Murray's *Fivefathers* selection) shows us the poet bidding for extra-temporal transcendence, but finding himself "out of time" in the different sense of being caught out by the process of human mortality and decay; "our moments out of time run out of time because they are always made out of the substance of time itself". The prime testing ground for this hypothesis is that supreme Australian poem "Five Bells", in which the lament for a drowned friend becomes the occasion for Slessor's desperate search for a time "that does not flow". The search is a failure, since the drowned man belongs to memory that itself "does not flow", a deathly realm from which the elegy does not escape. Death is dead in the poem only because time is dead too, to paraphrase Beckett on the climactic scene in Proust's *Le Temps Retrouvé*. This is indeed a retreat from the buoyancy of the great Romantic elegies, but Kane argues that Slessor puts the "negative" to work by using it to force his poetry ever more closely up against its limits. "Five Bells" is followed by "Beach Burial", with its closing image of dead German and Allied soliders "enlisted on the other front". Lacking the necessary Romantic or religious certainties, the poem brings us to the threshold of non-existence but cannot presume to fill its void. Death is not the only void that haunts "Beach Burial" however, since another trait which Slessor shares with Ransom is a premature abandonment of poetry, and "Beach Burial" was to be his last poem despite his living on for almost three more decades. Yet even this silence is not the end of the story: generous as Murray's selection of his work is, it is no substitute for a reading of *One Hundred Poems*, the standard edition of his work, still unavailable outside Australia. May this magnificent voice not have to wait much longer for a full Irish or British edition.

"Romanticism and classicism are not matters with which creative writers can afford to bother overmuch", growled Eliot in *After Strange Gods*. Kane's chapter on A.D. Hope is a concerted attempt to understand him in terms of that most jaded of oppositions. Hope's own position, it has to be said, abounds in contradictions. An admirer of Pope, Crabbe and Goldsmith, he frequently writes as though Coleridge or Baudelaire were his gods. More important than either or these, and the key figure in understanding Hope, I think, is that most Augustan of Romantics, Byron.

It is Byron's influence we find in poems such as "A Letter from Rome", "Persons from Porlock" and "Conversation with Calliope"—the conversational style, occasionally running to garrulousness, the knockabout rhyming, the bracing view of sexual relations so unfairly construed by some as misogyny. Hope's classical side is finally a question of temperament more than of any watertight aesthetic, a psychological counterbalance to his occasional excesses of Romantic subjectivity. In his sexual poems, we find Hope succumbing to the siren call of the flesh at one moment only to draw back in terrified *memento mori* mood the next. But even the insight into the vanity of human wishes springs from an acceptance of their inevitable triumph in all their suicidal folly:

Was it your luck or genius to discover  
That living is this voyage among the dead,  
That poets have one task: to tell the brave  
How all his victories must be lost in bed  
And in the womb say to each unborn lover:  
The hand that rocks the cradle rules the grave. ("Sonnets to Baudelaire")

Not the least of Hope's achievements has been to render both "classical" and "romantic" equally inadequate to his rich and varied body of work.

Kane devotes a short chapter to Ern Malley, a poet whose fame has now reached proportions his creators could scarcely have dreamt of when they invented both him and his complete *oeuvre* in a single afternoon in October 1943. These were James McAuley and Harold Stewart, on war-time duty at the Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs, and united in the belief that Australian modernism, as represented by Max Harris's magazine *Angry Penguins*, had gone too far. *Angry Penguins* was an all-too-easy target with its effusive manifestoes and recycled English apocalypse, but Ern's unmasking had a profoundly demoralising effect on Australian poetry, placing anything remotely experimental beyond the pale for decades. Valiant efforts were made to defend the poems or claim that McAuley and Stewart had created genuine works of art in spite of their stated intentions. The creators, though, were having none of it. It is ironic then that far from disappearing with *Angry Penguins*, which soon ceased publication, Malley became a ghost in the machine of Australian poetry and, in the long run, upstaged at least one of his creators. The inclusion of all his poems in John Tranter and Philip Mead's *Penguin Book of Modern Australian Verse* of 1991 would seem to represent his apotheosis (Harold Stewart's "own" work by contrast is not included).

Les Murray has never been much under the spell of Malley, and nominates as his other "fivefathers" (after Slessor) Roland Robinson, David Campbell, James McAuley and Francis Webb, none of them available in separate non-Australian editions (unlike Hope and Judith Wright, whom he consequently excludes). Robinson (1912-1992) was born in County Clare. The decisive event of his poetic life was his encounter with Aboriginal culture while on war-time service in the Northern Territory, after which he became the most energetic of the writers associated with the Jindyworobak group. He is a beguiling narrative poet: it's difficult to dip into a poem that starts "Djanbun's the platypus. He was a man one time" ("The Platypus") and not want to read on. Taken *en bloc* though, Robinson's work undoubtedly palls: the poeticality with which it invests its Aboriginal sources becomes too predictable and *faux naïf*. Sometimes it as if we can hear the anthropologist's dictaphone whirring in the background as yet another oldtimer spins him a yarn. He is at his best when he allows a more developed sense of the individual and the psychological into his work, as in "The Blue Gum Forest", "The Creek" and "Northern Oriole".

Like Robinson, David Campbell (1915-1979) seems to belong to a more innocent and uncomplicated age than ours. "The Australian Dream", in which the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh come to stay in his boiler-room, cannot find many echoes on Australian poets' pillows these days. A rugby blue at Cambridge and two caps for England, followed by wartime decorations for his bravery as a Wing Commander all bespeak the vigorous, fresh-air type. This can turn his work at its most unreflecting into a form of genteel surfboard-waxing, as in "Here's to Sydney" ("Here's to Sydney in the summer!"). But his social portraiture and use of ballad form help to make poems like "Small-town Gladys", "Mothers and Daughters" and "Hotel Marine" the successes they are, while the memorable sequence "Ku-ring-gai Rock Carvings" should guarantee his berth in the anthologies for the foreseeable future.

*Fivefathers'* fourth poet is perhaps the one from whom Les Murray himself has learnt most: James McAuley (1917-1976). His concoction of the Malley hoax can be seen in part as a reaction to the wilder side of his youthful self—atheist and anarchist radical—but also as the first step on the long road to the arch conversativism he espoused in later years, including a conversion to ultramontanist Catholicism. Most of his best work had been done by the late 1950s; his attempts in later years to purify Australian verse by returning it to the diction of eighteenth-century hymnody inevitably recall Donald Davie in England. McAuley needed Augustan restraint and decorum in much the same way as A.D. Hope

did—as a corrective to his natural instincts, since the veneer of order cannot entirely conceal what remains at bottom a deeply romantic sensibility. There can be no doubting the sincerity of his convictions, but it is painful to watch them laying waste to his talent, and Murray is surely right to represent the costive, late McAuley as sparingly as he does. What this leaves is a strange mixture of satirist, sacramentalist and landscape poet. His best-known poem, the beautiful “Because”, deals with his parents’ emotional inarticulacy but, no less awkward itself, comes close to compensatory melodrama in their defence:

Judgment is simply trying to reject  
A part of what we are because it hurts.  
The living cannot call the dead collect:  
They won’t accept the charge, and it reverts.

It’s my own judgment day that I draw near,  
Descending in the past, without a clue,  
Down to that central deadness: the despair  
Older than any hope I ever knew.

Last and oddest of the “fivefathers” is Francis Webb (1925-1973), the nearest thing to a literary David Helfgott in Australian verse, though without the happy ending. Of his precocious brilliance, first seen in the long poem *A Drum for Ben Boyd* (1948), there can be no doubt. *Leichhardt in Theatre* (1952) contains some of the short poems for which he is still best known, including “Morgan’s Country”, “On First Hearing a Cuckoo” and “A View of Montreal”. *Birthday* followed in 1953, containing “The Canticle”, a sequence on St Francis of Assisi, but what came next was mental collapse and institutionalisation. Webb had always been a religious poet but his schizophrenic condition, allied to a deep-rooted fear of his latent homosexuality, drove him to new extremes of spiritual self-interrogation. Webb had highly developed musical tastes, and the distended, agonized structure of his later work often resembles that of two composers he wrote about, Bruckner and Mahler. Comparisons could also be made with Robert Lowell, the “locked razor” of whose hospital style finds a troubled counterpart in “Ward Two”, with its “Tight scrimmage of blankets in the dark” and “X-rays scintillant as a flower”. More than any other of the “fivefathers” Webb suffers from being excerpted: poems like “The Brainwashers” and “Lament for St Maria Goretti” make little sense except in the overall context of Webb’s work, and are likely to discourage as many readers as they intrigue. Webb’s early death robbed him of the chance to enjoy the largesse of the “academic age” of Murray’s subtitle, with the result that

he has come to enjoy a posthumous reputation as a touchstone of all that is marginal and unaccommodated in Australian verse. But it is hard to see how a poet as eccentric and, in the small number of his best poems, incomparable as Webb could ever be assimilated into any mainstream, let alone an academic one. “Man must clasp to his soul / The sacred illness”, he wrote in the epilogue to “Electric”, and for the difficult pleasure of reading Webb the risk of contagion remains a small price to pay.

Murray’s anthology aims to capture a particular historical moment, that of the years between the emergence of Slessor and the mobilisation of the university machine which Murray has anatomised elsewhere in his critical prose. Kane’s study moves a little closer to the present by including brief chapters on Judith Wright, the late Gwen Harwood and Murray himself. His heavily theorised approach, however, militates against his writing straightforward literary history, as does the premium he places on religious experience and Romantic transcendence. The sense of his study being driven by a single thesis—that Australian poetry is still working out the legacy of a belated Romanticism—makes for some repetitiveness and forced marching of his chosen writers along the *via negativa* he sees as the true path of Australian poetry. It is disappointing that recent writers who would tend to call into question the ubiquity of the Romantic paradigm, John Tranter and the *Scripsi* school for example, are so cursorily treated in the conclusion, rather than being given a chapter to themselves. It is difficult to decide, at the end of the book, whether it is Australian poetry as a whole that is Romantic or merely Paul Kane. As a statement of the Romantic position though, *Australian Poetry* performs a necessary and wholly commendable function. It demonstrates the uniqueness of Australian poetry, its long struggle with its origins and protracted coming of age, as well as providing close readings of some of the most distinctive English language poets of the century. The first-time reader of Australian poetry I began by invoking could do a lot worse than start here.

A name which does not find its way into Kane’s book, but which has marked itself out as among the most promising of younger Australian poets is that of John Kinsella. Kinsella was born in Perth in 1963, and has made the desiccated landscapes of Western Australia his own as surely as Les Murray has mythologized his Bunyah farm in New South Wales. The title of one of Kinsella’s sequences, “Syzygy”, can be defined as two elements in conjunction or opposition, and there is something syzygetic in Kinsella’s uncanny ability to shift registers. Poems like “The Silo”, “Pipeline” and “Inland” are as close to pastoral as Kinsella gets, a little like sandblasted Frost. “Syzygy” on the other hand is L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Kinsella, a corroboree of ruptured syntax, line-breaks you last saw in Louis

Zukofsky and a relationship to Kinsella's other side best summarised by "Link": "Can't make / head nor tail / of it: lyric?" Maybe not, but if Kinsella sometimes leaves his readers behind it is not for want of imagistic precision and meditative intensity, both of which he possesses in large enough quantities for us to forgive his occasional strays off radar. Certainly, there can be few writers so difficult that I am not be prepared to give them the benefit of the doubt if the reward is a poem as lucid and perfect as "Plumburst", showing in fourteen lines why Kinsella is a poet we must take seriously:

The neat greens of Monument Hill  
roll into sea, over the rise the soft rain  
of plumfall deceives us in its groundburst.

If lightning strikes from the ground up,  
and Heaven is but an irritation that prompts  
its angry spark, then plums are born  
dishevelled on the ground and rise  
towards perfection...

Out of the range of rising plums  
we mark the territory of the garden,  
testing caprock with Judas trees,  
pacing out melon runs. Behind us a block  
of flats hums into dusk and the sun  
bursts a plum mid-flight.