

Early Literary Responses to Charles Harpur

“There’s a path to redemption—but *that* shall we miss,
Till we seek it no more in the old warring manner”
—Charles Harpur

‘... Australia has now produced a poet all her own, to atone for the indiscretions of poetasters among her adopted sons.’ So wrote Henry Parkes in his review of Charles Harpur’s first published volume, *Thoughts, A Series of Sonnets*,¹ which appeared in the *Register* of 22 November 1845.² The enthusiasm with which Parkes greeted the publication of verses by a ‘native’ poet who had already made his presence felt through contributions to various magazines and newspapers in the colony,³ echoed the sentiments expressed in an earlier review of Harpur’s short volume in the *Australian Chronicle*.⁴ The *Chronicle* detected in it verse of some creative merit and eagerly pronounced that at long last Australia had found grace in the eyes of the Muses. Thus the *Chronicle* contended that Charles Harpur was one of those whose literary pursuits ‘were fitted to crown his country with a diadem of poetry worthy of herself, and of her children’. Yet these reviews were not restricted to prophetic prognostications alone, they also pointed out the more concrete aspects of Harpur’s verse. Parkes, for instance, felt that ‘Mr. Harpur was ... not unworthy to be named with these august sons of genius (i.e. Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth)’ and the *Chronicle* critic complimented Harpur on his ‘great flow of words ... rich stores of imagination’. This young ‘sonnet-writer’, as Parkes called him, was however not without ‘affected piety and pure patriotism’.⁵ Unwittingly perhaps—though a more deliberate action is certainly discernible—Harpur was raised to the heights of the first genuine ‘bard of the country’, a position which agreed closely with Harpur’s own self-proclaimed position as stated in ‘The Dream of the Fountain’ which appeared in the *Chronicle* of 14 March 1843. In that poem the Muse of Poetry urged the poet to:

Be then the Bard of thy Country! O rather
Should such be thy choice than a monarchy wide!
Lo! ’tis the Land of the grave of thy father!
’Tis the cradle of Liberty!—Think and decide.⁶

In some ways, much of the literary reputation and the critical positions surrounding Charles Harpur arises from the inevitable conflict between cultural and historical significance on the one hand—Harpur was, after all, the first major poet of the country—and the aesthetic foundations of these assumptions on the other. As Henry Parkes’ own evocation demonstrates, too often ‘criticism’ aligned Harpur with the poetic ‘greats’ without attempting to distinguish Harpur’s personal strengths.⁷ Analogies of this sort are quite often nothing more than subconscious projections of an underlying sense of social and cultural uncertainty, the need to assert indigenous culture without denying its links with the overall European

civilisation. In the absence of a strong 'popular opinion'—the type of 'opinion' which was partly responsible for Gordon's elevation—assertions of this sort became all the more important. Yet popular 'literary opinion' is another matter and many people did write in praise of Harpur (though, it is equally true that a large number did not always concur). However, even literary opinion found Harpur slightly evasive at times, refusing to fit into the preconceived patterns of the writers concerned. A study of this sort cannot ignore the difficulties Harpur presented the critics of the time, difficulties, which, in part, can be explained by the collision of the literary expectations of the times against a very individualistic expression of poetry on the part of Harpur. It remains one of the great mysteries of Australian literary history that Australia's first major poet was a 'difficult' poet who, even consciously, remained slightly aloof from the prevailing tastes of the period, tastes which, as Dr Webby has so aptly demonstrated, were still circumscribed by Shakespeare, Milton, Scott and Burns.⁸

Moreover, it cannot be denied that part of the uncertainty also arose from Harpur's strong mystical bent which infused his somewhat 'traditional' romanticism with an element of the unknown which inevitably made readers uncomfortable. Thus the *Hawkesbury Courier* of 30 July 1846 wrote about Harpur's 'The Poet Boy's Love Wishes':

The above lines are very pretty, but the genius of the Bard, we think, soars too high for our comprehension. If it was somewhat more confined to terrestrial objects we should have read the verses with somewhat greater satisfaction.

Similarly, some eight years earlier (1838), James Martin in an article entitled 'The Pseudo-poets' (later included in 'The Australian Sketchbook') had, on slightly different grounds, repudiated Harpur for producing 'nothing colonial'. It is thus not surprising that Harpur's contemporary reputation became awkwardly inconclusive and even ragged: occasional outbursts followed by long periods of almost total silence.

Some months before the publication of *Thoughts*, the *Colonial Literary Journal*⁹ published a letter by A SON OF THE SOIL in which lavish praise was endowed upon the poet. In the letter the author praised Harpur's work for the 'cause of Australian literature' and continued with the compliment, 'the name of Charles Harpur is a magic-word for those of his countrymen who have aught of communion with the graceful and the beautiful in intellect'. 'The native bard of the southern isle', the author added, '(should) come forward and occupy that place which his exalted abilities entitled him—as the guiding altar of his countrymen in the glorious and soul-elevating paths of literature,—of a literature NATIONAL and "Australian".' Something of an evangelical role is early thrust upon Harpur by this rather 'effulgent' enthusiast who himself writes in a lush, romantic style complete with a liberal garnishing of loaded romantic terminology. Yet the fact that the writer signs himself (and so boldly) 'A SON OF THE SOIL' surely explains a lot of the nature of the inherent in Harpur. With this also comes the pre-ordained role of Harpur within the cultural history of Australia. Whether Harpur agreed with the exact meaning of that role remains, as we have seen, an 'undefined' phenomenon. No doubt, Harpur, the author of 'the Dream of the Fountain', had a strong sense of his poetic vocation but, he did not, one gathers from contemporary reports, want to be a simple poet voicing the virgin melodies of the Australian bush. When later editors such as Martin detected this, they were quick to excise the non-descriptive elements from his poetry. Few poets, it is true, have suffered because what they were was precisely what they were denied.

Newspaper articles and notes appended to poems of Charles Harpur continued to put across the view that Australian writing had come of age with Harpur. This sense of euphoria, broken occasionally by James Martin's criticism, continued until

the more volatile 1850's when for the first time Harpur's contributions to colonial culture began to be seriously questioned. In the 1840's, however, the applause was always there. The note preceding the republication of Harpur's 'To an Echo on the Banks of the Hunter'¹⁰ in the *People's Advocate* of 20 January 1849 is typical of the period:

We venture to assert that the following is the most beautiful poem belonging to the infant literature of this country. A still, deep, shining power pervades it . . . (Mr. Harpur's) is a wayward and erratic genius; but we consider this production alone would stamp him as a true poet.¹¹

The poem is quite self-consciously Wordsworthian with the usual pantheistic delight in 'swift murmurs', 'the whisperings' and the 'spirit of the past'. It is, however, a much better poem than many others written by Harpur. Here is the first stanza as it appeared in 1849:

I hear thee, Echo, and I start to hear thee,
With a strange tremour; as among the hills
Thy voice reverbs, and in swift murmurs near me
Dies down the stream, or with its gurgle low
Blends whisperingly—until my bosom thrills
With gentle tribulations, that endear thee,
But smack not of the present. 'Twas as though
Some spirit of the past did then insphere Thee
Even with the taste of life's regretted spring—
Waking wild recollections, to evince
My being's transfused connexion with each thing
Loved though long since.¹²

The precise reason why readers found this poem attractive is much more difficult to establish. If one uses 'Australian impressions' as a criterion then surely no other contemporary poem could have been further removed. If, however, even in the absence of local colouring people accepted this as indigenous verse, then it would not be totally incorrect to say that no one was too clear in his mind about the direction poetry should take in the young country. That Harpur is indeed being praised for sincerely capturing English ideals seems to me to be the only incontrovertible verdict one can give.

Yet it would be wrong to assume that part of if not the only real problem in the 1840's was an almost total absence of critical stance. Criticism—and creativity for that matter—did not exist in a vacuum in the colony. If major yardsticks by way of established men of letters and literary journals did not exist, there was still no dearth of speakers willing to elaborate on poetic ideas—especially Coleridgean and Romantic—to responsive audiences in Sydney. A slightly different perspective on national literature was given in a reprint of an article by the American Unitarian and sometime teacher of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dr William Channing. The article entitled 'The Importance and Means of a National Literature' appeared on Saturday 14 April 1838 in *The Colonist*. Echoing the American experience, Channing related literature to culture, society and the overall progress of human life. 'We maintain', he wrote, 'that a people, which has any serious purpose of taking a place among the improved communities, should studiously promote within itself every variety of intellectual exertion . . . Mind is the creative power . . . It should train within itself, men able to understand, and to use, whatever is thought and discovered over the whole earth . . . the whole mass of human knowledge must exist . . . in its higher minds.'¹³ Dr Channing's article was also a strong plea against provincialism and it emphasised that the creation of local literature should not mean that overseas trends ought not be completely ignored or that the works of the past should be by-passed. 'The more we receive from the other countries', he

added, 'the greater the need of an original literature.' Four years later, Hastings Elwin's translation of Metastasio's *Observations on the Poetics of Aristotle* was published by Kemp and Fairfax, the owners of the *Sydney (Morning) Herald*.¹⁴ The level of intellectual activity in the colony suggests that Harpur was quite possibly aware of a good many currents and cross-currents in the literary thought of the time. We know for certain that Harpur knew Emerson's ideas very well.¹⁵ Thus Harpur is not, as has been suggested by a number of twentieth-century apologists,¹⁶ a man who needs sympathy because of his essential isolation from 'culture'. That handicap was no doubt there: Harpur could not have had the exposure of a Gordon, for instance. But this is no feasible criterion on which to make judgments about Harpur because first it is not totally accurate and second it takes us to areas of conjecture verging on the sentimental.

Channing's American notes were used by R. K. Ewing who delivered a number of lectures on poetry at the Sydney School of Arts during 1844-46. The series ended in late June 1846 with a lecture which was partly devoted to "Colonial Poetry".¹⁷ In it Ewing referred to about twenty colonial poets including H. Halloran, W. C. Wentworth, Henry Parkes and Charles Harpur. In the *Spectator* report, however, it was felt that Mr Ewing 'might have devoted more time to analyze the beauties and less to the defects of Australian poetry'. At the same time the *Spectator* did note that 'there was much justice in his examination of the extravagantly high claims set up for Mr. C. Harpur by some injudicious friends'. In spite of this concession, the *Spectator*, like much contemporary criticism, wished to have it both ways: 'Yet, that gentleman has produced compositions of much merit' and 'Whatever be his faults we will forgive them, if it be only that some lines of his "To an Echo on the Banks of the Hunter" formed the inspiring theme for the following beautiful stanzas by Mr. Henry Halloran'.¹⁸ S. P. Hill's interpolation is typical of the 'damning with faint praise' which often occurs in the period. But no real definition of the special peculiarities or flavour of Australian poetry is actually given in defence. Without mentioning Harpur by name, the *Spectator* continued, 'their art (the Art of Australian poets) is no more trick of versification, but is a genuine growth of nature, having their root deep in their hearts—hearts accustomed to meditate with earnestness and feel with truth, upon the great duties and interests of mankind'.

In his June 1846 lecture, Ewing had referred to the claims made by Parkes about Harpur in his November 1845 review of Harpur's *Thoughts*. Parkes had suggested that Harpur was not unworthy of the genius of poets such as Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth. It is true, as Parkes pointed out in a letter to the *Spectator* of 4 July 1846, that Mr Duncan, the editor of the *Register*, had in fact cautioned him that 'it was a piece of extravagance to compare Harpur with Wordsworth'. As we have already seen, the comparison was in fact made by Parkes, though in his defence Parkes quickly pointed out that he did not feel that Harpur would ever 'attain to their (Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth's) universal fame'.¹⁹ Parkes left Harpur 'to take care of his own reputation' which, he felt, Harpur 'is well able to defend'.

And, indeed, Harpur wasted no time in getting himself involved in this mini Ewing-Parker-Harpur-Milton controversy, a controversy which, with some changes in cast, was to emerge again later in his career. Charging the editor of the *Spectator* of collusion with Mr Ewing ('that he and yourself had laid heads together upon the matter'), Harpur fumed with the wrath of a weather-beaten journalist and quipped at the 'intolerable nonsense' and the 'subterfuge' which was 'gross as the nature of a bog, and vile as the odour of the fox'.²⁰ In tone and sentiment at least, Harpur's violent outburst had already been equalled by his earlier letters to newspapers, especially those written in protest against editorial emendations of his poems.²¹

Thus by the time *The Bushrangers: A Play in Five Acts and Other Poems* appeared in 1853,²² Harpur had been the centre of lively and vigorous discussions in the Australian literary scene. But the exact nature of that enthusiasm, the responses to Harpur primarily as a poet, demonstrates a certain amount of discomfort in critical stance. What the critics and the newspapers of the period in fact sought was an 'epic' voice in Australian literature to strengthen cultural claims about the colony's 'maturity'. In this way wild comparisons to Homer, Milton and Shakespeare were made to assert one's own search for permanence in art and aesthetics. Hence the early literary responses to Harpur reflect a critical stance which has been pervasive since—an uneasiness arising out of a conflict between an uncertainty as to the literary worth of a writer against the feeling that indigenous culture should be encouraged and asserted at all times. Not surprisingly, then, to this day Harpur's reputation, while saved of the excesses of the early period, still continues to survive inconclusively.

NOTES:

1. Sydney, W. A. Duncan, 1845, 8vo. 16pp. Mitchell Library copy (C378) inscribed by the author to Mrs Parkes, 1 November 1845, with holograph notes by Sir Henry Parkes, 1895.
2. Duncan's newspaper to which Harpur had contributed poems pseudonymously under 'A Spirit of the Past' etc. Parkes also reviewed a work by G. F. Poole which was peremptorily dismissed.
3. For instance, the *Currency Lad* published a poem by Harpur as early as 4 May 1833. Another poem by 'Stebit' (Charles Harpur) appeared in Tegg's *Literary News*, 2 December 1837.
4. *Australian Chronicle*, 5 November 1845.
5. *Australian Chronicle*, *op. cit.*
6. Martin's 1883 edition of *Harpur Poems* has 1.1 'bard of the country', 1.3 'land' and 1.4 'Liberty! think'. This is followed by J. McAuley, *The Personal Element in Australian Poetry*, Angus & Robertson, 1970.
7. Harpur himself was very conscious of the larger 'tradition'. See Harpur holograph 'Discourse on Poetry', 32 mo. n.d., Mitchell Library, C386. Also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30/9/1859 for a report of a lecture given by Harpur.
8. Webby, E. A. "Literature and the Reading Public 1800-1850: A Study of the Growth and Differentiation of a Colonial Literary Culture during the Earlier Nineteenth Century", PhD thesis, Sydney University, August 1971. 4 Vols.
9. *Colonial Literary Journal*, 8 February 1845.
10. First appeared in the *Chronicle*, 7 March 1843. In the same year the *Chronicle* also published Harpur's 'Loneliness of Heart', 'The Dream of the Fountain', 'Sonnet to My Friend, Mr, J. J. Walsh', 'Sonnet, Description of the Prospect from Mount View, South of Jerry Plains' etc.
11. Note by Edward John Hawkesley, Editor of the *People's Advocate*, founded in December 1848 and sympathetic towards colonial poetry.
12. The text is the same as the one which appeared in 1843. In the final copy made by Harpur in 1865 (Mitchell A87, MS No. 6), however, the following changes were made: 1.2... strange shock, as from among... 1.3... voice, reverbing, in swift... 1.5... whisperingly, until... 1.7... Present... 1.8... Spirit... thee, 1.9... Spring. Martin made further changes in the 1883 edition of *Harpur Poems* and completely altered the final stanza.
13. It is worth remembering that like many other advocates of 'literary tradition' Channing also used the example of the Greeks as his overall paradigm.
14. So J. Normington-Rawling, *Charles Harpur, An Australian*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1962, p. 102. However, Webby, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 345, observes '... an anonymous translation of Observations... rendered into English with biographical notice of the author (Sydney, 1842)'.
15. The Mitchell Library copy of Emerson's *Eight Essays* (1852) is in fact the copy which was actually owned by Harpur and has 1855 inscribed in it.
16. Notably H. M. Green and E. Morris Miller.
17. *Spectator*, 1 July 1846. The lectures on poetry were generally of a high quality. The basic assumptions of his criticism were Platonic and Coleridgean: the 'ideal beauty' is the 'sublimar emanation' than the 'soul of poetry, which is energy' said Ewing in connection with Byron whose poetry, he felt, belonged to the latter category. The review was written by S. P. Hill.