

AUSTRALIAN LITERARY HOAX RECALLED

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IN 1944, a provocative minority group of Australian "modernist" poets, known as "Angry Penguins," were the victims of a literary hoax that put Australian literature into world press headlines. On Max Harris, editor of *Angry Penguins*, two Sydney poets foisted deliberately concocted obscurities as the posthumous work of a fictitious genius, Ern Malley, and the controversy that followed still continues as an undercurrent to Australian literary criticism and crystallises a cleavage between traditionalists and experimentalists that exists in all world.

The Adelaide University Arts Association published the first modest issue of *Angry Penguins* in 1941. It was a small unassuming, *avantgarde* poetry journal with a plain, putty-coloured cover, printed on art paper. The patron was C.R. Jury, a mature poet of a more traditional school than were the editors, Donald B. Kerr (afterwards a Royal Australian Air Force officer killed in operations at the end of 1942) and Max Harris, a 'teen-age undergraduate already locally notorious for the fire and fury of his modernistic verses.

The curious name, reflecting local issues, was taken from a poem by Max Harris that contains the verse:

We know no mithridation of despair
as drunks, the angry penguins of the night,
straddling the cobbles of the square,
tying a shoelace by fogged lamplight . . .

In the *Angry Penguin* world, street lights were lecherous, the seasons brittle, trees had silver, metallic leaves that jangled together, bending gaunt sea waves cracked under slate-coloured pitted skies, and bird breath raped the sighing air. It was a world in which thoughts stalked in the mind like superstitions, music was bitter shrapnel touched out of a piano, poets had epileptic stares and suffered from nerves that whispered madly in sullen darkness under an iron sky.

In August, 1943, *Angry Penguins* moved out of the undergraduate magazine class and, although still published from Adelaide, became what the editor-proprietor, Max Harris, described as "a literary and art journal proper . . . gaining recognition in the U.S.A. as the authoritative statement of im-

mediate Australian culture." Behind this growth were members of the Contemporary Art Society of Australia, a movement that adopted *Angry Penguins* as an organ of expression for its artistic ideas. John Reed, who was a member of the Contemporary Art Society and was connected by marriage to the wealthy Baillieu family, was announced as art editor.

Angry Penguins celebrated its new status by increased size, a new format, a coloured cover reproduced from a surrealist painting by Contemporary Art Society painter James Gleeson, and a generous selection of advanced art reproductions scattered among the prose and verse contributions. Among the contributors were Dylan Thomas, an English Apocalyptic, and Karl Shapiro, well-known American poet. A new title, transcending local issues, was suggested but never adopted.

The credo of the rejuvenated and expanded *Angry Penguins* movement was indicated by Max Harris in a note on the work of Dylan Thomas: "'No sermons, but the subjective truth.' This dictum of George Orwell has reduced the perspectives of poetry to that which is intense and personally true to the poet's experience—those emotional reverberations from the impact of the individual poet with life which forms the very feeding ground and source of poetic motive."

John Reed, the collaborating art editor, announced triumphantly: "Five years ago Australia was culturally stagnant; today, she is culturally alert and vigorous . . ."

The new "forum for the highest literary and art level emerging from this country" soon found itself the centre of one of those hard-slanting ideological battles that are inescapable corollaries of art and literary coteries the world over. Albert Tucker, then president of the Contemporary Art Society, contributed an article entitled, "Art, Myth and Society," in which he said: "The history of cultural development is a history of visionaries and innovators who, in their own day, were regarded as cranks and mad-dog revolutionaries, fit subjects for persecution and social ostracism. Today is no exception. There is no use for the progressive revolutionary artist, right, centre or unfortunately, left . . . With the cataclysmic social forces loosed upon the individual today, the carriers and creators of culture who do not conform to serving immediate needs of decrepit, 'democracies,' fascism, communism, etc., are also threatened with extinction."

Tucker's views clashed with the opinions of the social realists in the Contemporary Art Society and, before long, both

Tucker and Reed, along with *Angry Penguins*, were under attack as mouthpieces of "the decadent Right wing of the Contemporary Art Society, hopelessly devoid of all critical values." It was soon no longer true, if it ever had been, that *Angry Penguins* had the backing of "the leading painters in Australia."

The attack from the Left, however, was nothing like as devastating as the attack from the Right. Satisfied that *Angry Penguins* (now issued in Melbourne by the publishing firm of Reed and Harris) represented modern decadence at its worst, and "viewing with disgust a gradual decay of meaning and craftsmanship in poetry," two Sydney poets, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, concocted, according to them in the course of an afternoon, a fictitious obscurity for the express purpose of debunking the modern literary movement in Australia and overseas.

McAuley and Stewart sent their concoction to *Angry Penguins*. They represented themselves by letter as Ethel Malley, sister to Ern Malley, who had died at 25 of Grave's Disease, leaving a bundle of poems and a statement about them under the general title of the "Darkening Ecliptic." "It would be a kindness if you could let me know whether you think there is anything in them," wrote 'Ethel Malley.' "I am not a literary person myself and I do not feel I understand what he wrote, but I feel I ought to do something about them. Ern kept very much to himself and lived on his own of late years and he never said anything about writing poetry. He was very ill in the months before his death last July and it may have affected his outlook."

The hoax was more successful than McAuley and Stewart had ever dared hope. The next number of *Angry Penguins* was subtitled: "Autum Number to Commemorate the Australian poet, Ern Malley." Sidney Nolan had painted a surrealist cover to illustrate Malley's poems, which were published in full, with a lyrical commentary by Max Harris, who declared that Ern Malley was undoubtedly "one of the two giants of contemporary literature." "I am firmly convinced that this unknown mechanic and insurance peddler is one of the most outstanding poets that we have produced here," Harris wrote. "I was immediately impressed that here was a poet of tremendous power, working through a disciplined and restrained kind of statement into the deepest wells of human experience . . . His wide, difficult vocabulary emerges spontaneously and necessarily from his poetic motives . . . Malley approached poetry

with a tremendous sense of the importance of what he was doing."

McAuley and Stewart broke the story of their hoax to an eager press. The story circled the world. Communists and Roman Catholics joined in the laughter. Traditional poets who had been pilloried in the pages of *Angry Penguins* rejoiced. The newspaper reading public, usually indifferent to the claims of poetry and art, enjoyed a joke that vindicated their uneasy feeling that "all this modernistic art stuff is a lot of highbrow nonsense, anyway."

Some Australian critics flew to the defence of Harris and *Angry Penguins*, other joined delightedly in the laughter, and a few sat gingerly on the fence. From England, critic Herbert Read cabled: "I too would have been deceived by Ern Malley, but hoaxer by own petard has touched off unconscious sources inspiration work too sophisticated but has elements genuine poetry."

Herbert Read's attitude was the line taken by most of those who defended *Angry Penguins*. Professor A. R. Chisholm, Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Melbourne University, wrote: "Believe it or not, much of it really is poetry . . . Even the poem that begins with a few phrases from a pamphlet on the eradication of mosquitoes happens to have some genuine flashes of it . . . I think that one at least of the two writers is so genuine a poet that even when he sets out to mystify an editor he can't help writing poetically. It's like a highly educated man trying to talk Cockney . . ."

The opposite view was best expressed by H. M. Green, Sydney University librarian and author of the best-known introduction to Australian literature. "'Sting them, sting them, my Anopheles,' wrote Messrs. McAuley and Stewart . . . And they have stung, not only the Penguins, but the whole group, overseas as well as Australia, to whom the Penguins belong. Even if one were disposed to accept the rather thin contention that the hoaxers somehow composed great poetry unconsciously and in spite of themselves, that contention exploded by their detailed account of the deliberate way in which the whole business was carried out. What is more, the stinging was justified and timely, as an attack upon a perversion of poetry that has spread to three continents and misled a number of talented young men, of whom Mr. Harris is an outstanding Australian example . . ."

Dragged from the general context, there were plenty of passages in "The Darkening Ecliptic" to justify the general

opinion that the editors of *Angry Penguins* were completely without judgment and childishly eager to accept without question any obscure work written in remote and esoteric language and filled with Freudian symbols.

For instance, in one verse, "Ern Malley" exposed himself clearly enough:

I assert: the caterpillar feet
of these predictions lead nowhere,
It is necessary to understand
That a poet may not exist, that his writings
Are the incomplete circle and straight drop
Of a question mark
And yet I know I shall be raised up
On the vertical banners of praise.

There was plenty of sheer nonsense, too, as:

Swamps, marshes, borrow-pits and other
Areas of stagnant water serve
As Breeding grounds . . . 'Now
Have I found you, my Anapeles'.
(There is a meaning for the circumspect)
Come, we will dance sedate quadrilles,
A pallid polka or a yelping shimmy
Over these sunken sodden breeding-grounds
We will be wraiths and wreaths of tissue-paper
To clog the Town Council in their plans,
Culture forsooth. Albert, get my gun.

However, as Herbert Read insisted, "the general effect is undoubtedly poetic and poetic on an unusual level of achievement. There is not only an effective use of metaphor, a subtle sense of rhythmic variation, but even a metaphysical unity which cannot be the result of unintelligent deception."

Or, as Professor Chisholm put it, "pieces are not only poetic, but are really good poetry. This, for instance:

Poetry: the leaves and fishes,
Or no less miracle;
For in this deft pentacle
We imprison our wishes.

That is a very good definition of poetry, which condenses a universe of thoughts, object and emotions into a small compass, as a magician condenses his power into the mystic seal of Solomon (pentacle) or as the abundance that fed a multitude was condensed by circumstances into a few leaves and fishes . . ."

In other words, McAuley and Stewart's "concoctions" were certainly not the result of unintelligent deception. The two men put enough of their own considerable poetic skill into a parody sufficiently good to have deceived even more experienced critics than Max Harris and John Reed.

The parody, however, certainly exposed the undoubted tendency of "modernist" writers to adopt difficult and esoteric words as an affectation, an affectation that follows a fashion just as surely as the traditionalist follows a fashion when he writes heroic couplets or uses the sonnet form. As Harris himself had said, without taking sufficient note of his own dictum, a critic should judge according to the highest aesthetic judgment and sensitivity and not according to an extraneous purpose.

In a comment on the Ern Malley incident, published by *Angry Penguins*, Herbert Read summed up the lesson it contained for Australian writers generally: "You are right to set yourselves cosmopolitan standards, however regional your inspiration. Art is universal, and is only Australian, English, French, etc. in its local colouring or accent. At the same time I find in most of the work you publish a sophistication which is clever rather than moving. It is not simple enough, not human enough . . . The models are not Kafka and Rilke, not Joyce, not Picasso. The idols are all destroyed by this war. We have to look inside ourselves, and outside at nature, with new and innocent eyes, and then we may create an art which even Ern Malley could not fake."

Angry Penguins, which ceased publication soon after the Ern Malley debacle, shook Australian literature out of a rather provincial rut, aroused traditionalists to re-examine their principles and drew the attention of influential critics in Britain and America to the fact that Australian poetry, whether traditional or modern, is well beyond the frontier ballad stage of literary development.

The hoax, too had a good effect on many of the Angry Penguins. "Undeniably the poetry of the *Angry Penguins* School was in need of some such shock," wrote Brian Elliott, lecturer in Australian literature at Adelaide University. "What was so admirable about the whole hoax was its wonderfully prophylactic value. What can the Penguins do now, poor birds, but look about them and consider one or two other present realities beside the lilies of the psychological field."

That some of them prepared to do so was clear from an

article on the affair contributed by Geoffrey Dutton (an original *Angry Penguins* poet) from a Royal Australian Air Force station where he was a Sergeant-Pilot. In his article Dutton attacked "a very advanced form of puritanism" which set up art as a god "that must be served so vigorously as to be incompatible for any length of time with love, nature, human fellowship or any of the other facets of life, the poet being finally his own source of inspiration, his own moral code and his own mode of experience . . . The outlook is towards death and mortality instead of towards life and recurrence . . . In war and after, it should be possible, partly through wider channels of life and nature and love, away from the too solitary machinations of minds directed and owned by death and destruction."

We can perhaps leave the last word with Max Harris, somewhat chastened now and more inclined to admit the merit of verse in which "meaning is crystallised and developed within language" as well as verse in which "language emerges through emotional complex". Writing in *Angry Penguins* after the Ern Malley affair, Harris said:

It is quite clear that a period which is superficially chaotic as this, will confuse all but the strongest artists who will take advantage of an apparent sanction for the abandoning of restraint and will add to the confusion by the outpourings of the insignificant impulses of their own trifling egos.

Stewart and McAuley are not alone in 'viewing with disgust a gradual decay of meaning and craftsmanship in poetry' (though others might apply somewhat different standards) and it is more than conceivable that their 'experiment,' having thrown the limelight on modern poetry, will serve a very valuable purpose (though not the one they intended,) because it can only serve to strengthen modern poetry and not to debunk it.