

VIJAY MISHRA

Charles Harpur's Reputation 1853-1858: The years of Controversy

Between 1853 and 1858 there was a dramatic change in the literary reputation of Charles Harpur. Prior to 1853 Harpur had produced a volume of verse, *Thoughts, A Series of Sonnets*, and had been a regular contributor to various newspapers since 1833. There were, no doubt, minor disagreements as in the Ewing-Parkes-Milton controversy which occurred soon after Parkes' very warm appraisal of Harpur's slim volume,¹ but these were not major criticisms of the poet. 1853, however, began with the publication of Harpur's second volume and by 1858 Harpur had become the centre of one of the major literary controversies of the period. Moreover, much more fundamental questions relating not only to the intrinsic worth of Harpur as a poet but also to the overall direction of Australian literature began to be raised and discussed in earnest. This change in literary responses as it relates to Charles Harpur is one of the more interesting episodes of mid-nineteenth century Australian literary history and deserves a closer look.

Charles Harpur's second volume, *The Bushrangers: A Play in Five Acts and Other Poems*, appeared in 1853.² It was dedicated to N.D. Stenhouse

EDITORS' NOTE: Mr Mishra has published two previous articles on Harpur's reputation in *Southerly*, 36 (1976) and *Westerly*, No. 4 (1977).

1. See Henry Parkes' review in the *Register* of 22 November 1845. See also *Spectator*, 1 July 1846 for a summary of Ewing's lectures and the *Spectator* of 4 July 1846 for Parkes' reply.
2. *The Bushrangers: A Play in Five Acts and Other Poems* (Sydney: W.R. Piddington, 1853).

'by one who, though unacquainted with him, has learned to appreciate his character and talents'.³ The play, 'The Bushrangers', was itself a re-working, though ever so slightly, of 'The Tragedy of Donohoe' which Harpur had sent to the *Sydney Monitor* when he was barely twenty one.⁴

Daniel Deniehy,⁵ a close friend of Harpur and a fluent man of letters in his own right, reviewed the volume for the *Empire* of 22 April 1853. Invoking Channing's claim⁶ that the 'men of a nation are not alone its noblest but its only genuine products', Deniehy recapitulated, though with greater gusto and erudition, Parkes' earlier (1845) judgment on 'native genius':

This little volume contains the most satisfactory proof of the existence of native genius of a high order, that has been yet offered to the public. . . . In the book before us, the reader will not only find exquisite poetry, a rare and delicate imaginative loveliness; but above all an impress of character noble and masculine. . . .

That 'self-moulded intellect' of Harpur was, to Deniehy, a microcosmic expression of the larger destiny of Australia, the expression, indeed, of a free, poetic spirit growing independently of alien influences. After admitting Harpur's defects ('petty defects of execution lying here and there on the surface of his compositions . . .'), Deniehy's main argument returned to the fact that like himself, the poet was 'native born': he belonged 'to the soil, and grew. . . .' Implicit in this adulation is thus an attempt at edification not unlike those which had been already showered upon Harpur. Still, Deniehy was a remarkably good critic and in fact pre-dates those critics whom Brian Kiernan felt 'drew the same organicist analogies as did social scientists like Comte, Taine or Herbert Spencer'.⁷ Indeed, part of the problem with Deniehy's review is that it ends up as

3. See A.M. Williams, 'N.D. Stenhouse: A Study of a Literary Patron in a Colonial Milieu', M.A. thesis, Sydney University, 1963, pp.75-78 for details of relationship between Stenhouse and Harpur.

4. *Sydney Monitor*, 10 May 1834. A number of suggestions were addressed to Harpur who was variously called 'the ingenious youth', 'a native of Windsor' and 'a currency lad'.

5. See Frances Devlin Glass, 'Daniel Henry Deniehy (1828-65): A Study of an Australian Man of Letters', PhD Thesis, A.N.U., 1974. My thanks to Dr Glass for answering a number of queries.

6. Dr William Channing, the American Unitarian and teacher of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose article, 'The Importance and Means of a National Literature', was reprinted in *The Colonist* of Saturday 14 April 1838. His strong plea against provincialism was taken up by a number of local critics.

7. Brian Kiernan, *Criticism* (Melbourne: O.U.P., 1974), p.10.

an aesthetic exercise in itself. However, Deniehy made poetic as well as purely cultural observations. He agreed that 'the miscellaneous poems' (some of the best that Harpur ever wrote) are 'far superior to "The Bushrangers"':

There is evidence in them of profounder and maturer thought, of a clearer perception of the aims and ends of poetry, perhaps, also, of a completer mastery of expression. The materials of which the drama is composed seem scarcely to have arrived at the requisite state of fusion in the poet's mind, when he commenced his labour; at all events it is quite obvious in the play itself that they have not been sufficiently wrought up.

Sonnets such as 'His mind alone is kingly . . .', 'There's a rare Soul of Poetry which may be', 'The manifold Hills forsaken by the sun' are singled out for particular attention. But it is 'The Creek of the Four Graves' which captures Deniehy's imagination and which, he feels, would best support 'Mr. Harpur's claims to a laurel'. The great strength of the poem is its unified sensibility: 'In Harpur nature is related to the soul of the spectator, gazing, looking and thoughtfully awake. . . .' It is indeed remarkable that this aspect of Harpur was seen so early by Deniehy. That Harpur is not simply a literal realist but one who transforms the world into his own inner consciousness and expresses it in terms of an image, is precisely what Judith Wright discovers about Harpur a century later.⁸ For Deniehy, however, the exercise was more an extension of his very real interest in Coleridgean criticism. Thus when he writes that 'The Creek of the Four Graves' 'has the perfect inward organisation and harmony of a Poem in the severe philosophical sense, and is everywhere alive with the creative imagination—the true "faculty divine"' he is not really talking about the poem itself; rather he is speaking about the poetic process in Coleridgean-Romantic terms.

Nor does Deniehy lose sight of Milton. According to him the following lines have 'a contour . . . of Miltonic grandeur':

Yea, thence surveyed, the Universe might have seemed
Coiled in vast rest,—only that one dim cloud,
Diffused and shapen like a mighty spider,
Crept as with scrawling legs along the sky;
And that the stars, in their bright orders, still
Cluster by cluster glowingly revealed

8. Especially, Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (Melbourne: O.U.P., 1965), pp.1-18. 'If Nature is accepted as Harpur accepted it, as part of man and of his consciousness, the strange and the unusual lose their repugnance. . . .' (p.18).

As this slow cloud moved on,—high over all,—
 Looked wakeful—yea, looked thoughtful in their peace.

Yes, 'Miltonic grandeur' indeed! But only if attempt at cosmic considerations and echoes of epic tone (however dismal) are themselves taken to be Miltonic. Surely, on a purely poetic level, there is something amiss in the metaphorical dissonance created by the image of a scrawling spider! But the criticism may well express Deniehy's own rather conservative position about 'native genius': for that genius to be poetically great, it must stand the test of the epic poets, especially Milton and Homer. The epic has, ironically, remained a great Australian dream in literature.

Perhaps the final few lines of Deniehy's article say more than anything else about the distance Harpur criticism—in terms of his reputation and not in terms of the quality of the criticism itself—had reached by 1853: "To an Echo on the Banks of the Hunter" .. alone would have obtained for Harpur a seat among the serene creators of Immortal things.' The poem referred to appeared some ten years before and was praised by people as diverse as 'A SON OF THE SOIL' and Edward John Hawkesley for very much the same reasons as suggested by Deniehy.⁹

The *Freeman's Journal* also welcomed *The Bushrangers* with much enthusiasm.¹⁰ 'Seldom has a more grateful and pleasing duty fallen our lot', wrote the reviewer with a sense of excitement verging on the hyperbolic. The poet 'is possessed of poetic talents of a very high order . . . he is no "mere jangling rhymester"', but one endowed with all those rare and tender sympathies of "mind" that constitute a *true poet*'. Such adulation, however, did not lose sight of the important cultural role which Harpur must actually perform: 'Australia is yet destined to occupy no mean position in the Temple of the Muses'. Like Deniehy, the reviewer did not consider 'The Bushrangers', the play, worthy of much critical attention. Echoing in some ways the advice given to young Harpur by Smith Hall of the *Sydney Monitor* in May 1834,¹¹ he felt that the subject of the play was scarcely appropriate. 'The Creek of the Four Graves' is again mentioned but it is 'The Bush Fire' and 'Morning' which fill

9. See the *Colonial Literary Journal*, 8 February 1845 and the *People's Advocate*, 20 January 1849.

10. *Freeman's Journal*, 18 May 1853. It is of some importance to literary history to note that in spite of this review, no further mention of Harpur is made in the *Freeman's Journal* that year. There is also a singular absence of 'popular judgment' (letters, etc.) on Harpur.

11. A change of the hero's name (to Walmesley or Webber) and a reworking of the mainly Shakespearian plagiarisms were some of his suggestions. See also note 4.

the *Freeman's Journal* critic with agonising romantic raptures. Of 'The Bush Fire' he wrote: 'This is truly poetry of the very highest order, redolent of the most exquisite harmony and breathing a tenderness of sentiment perfectly enchanting'. Having expressed the 'nation's' indebtedness to Harpur for 'the rich intellectual banquet', the reviewer concluded with a strong plea that 'Australia should stretch forth no niggard hand to welcome her only "Son of Song"'. Two points raised here, however, need some emphasis. Harpur is considered Australia's *only* poet and his real strength is in the field of 'Song': Harpur the sonneteer rather than Harpur the descriptive poet and the satirist. Deniehy—and Henry Parkes before him—had tried to show Harpur's more traditional strengths and without stating it categorically, they were more inclined to see him in terms of something akin to the epic poet: hence the analogies to Milton and a subsequent one, by Deniehy, even to Homer. Unfortunately, such criticism was never allowed to develop along purely aesthetic lines; the need, almost compulsive, for eulogy and the development of poetry strictly Australian was such that when tempers did flare up, as we shall see later, judgments on Harpur very quickly became enmeshed in larger issues about art, culture and literature in the colony.

The reviewer of the *Maitland Mercury*¹² placed Harpur among 'English poets' but, like the reviewers of the *Empire* and the *Freeman's Journal*, he also felt that Harpur had written a 'poor play, poor in reading, and we should judge, poor on the stage'. The poems, however, could stand scrutiny from the standpoint of perhaps the 'finest poets'. Raising canons of criticism similar to Deniehy's, the *Maitland Mercury* praised the very considerable descriptive powers of the poet and felt that 'The Creek of the Four Graves' 'would alone entitle the author to be held a true poet'. Among others entitled to some praise were: 'The Bush Fire', 'Morning', 'A Poet's Home', 'The Manifold Hills', 'The Leaf Glancing Boughs', 'The Voice of the Native Oak', 'Emblem' and 'The Dream by the Fountain'. The reviewer, moreover, did not lose track of what Deniehy had raised some three weeks before. Harpur's great strength as a poet was his 'fine appreciation of the harmonies existing between the mind of man and the sights and sounds of nature'. A new aspect of the *Mercury* review was that the 'amatory verse' and 'the misanthropic bits of poetry' were also considered. Of the former the reviewer felt that they 'want heart' and the 'females depicted are creatures of the poet's imagination rather than

12. *Maitland Mercury*, 14 May 1853

true women'.¹³ The misanthropic element arose because 'Mr. Harpur gave way to a temporary à la Byron feeling once so common with English poetasters . . .'. It is important to note that this Byronic tendency is noticed by a contemporary reviewer, and evaluated for what it is worth, a mild lapse and no more. It would be unwise to make much more of the Byronic in Harpur's verse or, for that matter, the verse and prose of Harpur's contemporaries.¹⁴ The review ends with a statement in which is implicit a faint dream of the great Australian work of art: 'The man who could write "The Creek of the Four Graves" could surely write a larger work of the same high merit.' The 'epic dream' was to remain unfulfilled, for Harpur wrote little after 1853 to equal or excel the poems published in the 1853 volume.

Praise was also forthcoming from slightly different quarters. A 'Currency Lass' (Adelaide Ironside) sang Harpur's praise in a poem published in the *Advocate* which extolled Harpur in terms of the usual virtues of Patriotism, Liberty and Truth. Henry Halloran, whom some considered superior to Harpur much to Harpur's chagrin, wrote a moving, albeit slightly pompous sonnet:

A new Achilles by the old walls stands
 Of this grey Troy, the World—and calls aloud—
 Burning for battle with the False and the Proud,
 He lifts his fierce immitigable hands,
 Or as another Orpheus, he commands
 The stoutest hearts to tears—all inly-bowed—
 While from his own throngs forth a various crowd
 Of Hopes and Fears with their illusive bands.
 Sweet thoughts are gathering in my own moved mind—
 Remembered tones are in my ravished ear,
 Angelic forms, unutterably dear,
 Come round me, like rich odours in the wind,
 And I am gazing on thy pages, blind,
 With a loud-beating heart—and many a hurrying tear.¹⁵

13. The observation was, of course, not true so far as the sonnets' inspiration is concerned. The 'woman' in the sonnets was Mary Doyle whom Harpur married in 1850 after a lengthy courtship.

14. See Barry Argyle's *An Introduction to the Australian Novel 1830-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Argyle looks at a number of characters in Australian fiction in terms of the Byronic hero e.g. pp.107ff: Henry Kingsley's George Hawker is considered in Byronic terms.

15. I owe this reference to J. Normington-Rawling, *Charles Harpur, An Australian* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), p.184. Normington-Rawling does not give his source and so far I have not been able to locate it.

Except for James Martin's strong objections¹⁶ to Harpur's pretensions to colonial poetry, there was little, if any, real reaction against Harpur from men of letters in the colony. There were a few minor instances of disagreement but these really involved semantic niceties. Ewing (1846), it is true, had some reservations and the *Spectator* had easily concurred with Ewing's judgment. Harpur himself was, however, more than certain of his position and had quickly pointed out that Ewing's criticism was in fact a conspiracy by the establishment against local talent, a theme which he was to hammer with greater vehemence later in life. In spite of these minor fluctuations in reputation, accidental asides rather than closely argued points of view, Harpur remained the self-proclaimed bard of Australia and most men of letters agreed, or silently assented though with a slight quirk.

In terms of literary history, if we wish to look for a watershed in Harpur's reputation that watershed was Daniel Deniehy's lecture on Charles Harpur delivered in the hall of the Mechanics' Institute in late November, 1857.¹⁷ It is ironic that, as in the case of the Ewing-Parkes-*Spectator* controversy of the mid-forties, once again it was a reference to Harpur's poetic 'antecedents' which resulted in violent disagreements. The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 27 November 1857 referred to the lecture with the rubric *Harpur-Homer-Milton* and opened with the remark: 'Such is the order of excellence in which, according to Mr. Deniehy, the names of the greatest poets the world has yet produced should stand.' In a letter to the editor the following day Deniehy pointed out that he did not have such a literal meaning in mind when he delivered the lecture. However, there is little doubt that he had actually said this in an attempt to restore Harpur's reputation which had been on the wane despite glowing newspaper reports some four years ago. But the exaggeration obviously misfired; Harpur never regained the quiet literary deference he enjoyed in the mid-fifties.

Tempers didn't quite flare up when the *Morning Herald* bemoaned the passing of rigid literary standards: 'We can imagine no worse indication of the progress and mental status of a community than that its standards of excellence should be the writers of trashy poetry.' The 'Correspondent' who wrote the report declared that there was 'irreverence, if not impiety'

16. James Martin 'The Pseudo-Poets' (1838) in *The Australian Sketchbook*.

17. *Freeman's Journal* had a report on the lecture a day after the *Morning Herald* comment and mentioned that the lecture had been delivered on Monday evening. It would be reasonable to conjecture from this (without referring to old almanacs) that Deniehy delivered his lecture on 25 November 1857.

in the idea that writers of 'namby-pamby, wishy-washy, milk-and-water verses' should be made equal to Homer and Milton. With mock condescension, the report went on to suggest that Harpur was not as bad as most of the other colonial poets, indeed he was the 'best of them'. In an equally mocking tone and with quite deliberate undercutting, the 'Correspondent' referred to Deniehy's praise of 'The Creek of the Four Graves' in the following terms:

Mr. Harpur it seems has written some verse entitled 'The Creek of the Four Graves' . . . [Mr. Deniehy thought] . . . there was nothing superior to it in the whole range of poetry. There was in Pope's Homer some descriptions of a similar order, but this poem was not surpassed even by the productions of the great bard of Greece.

In the absence of Deniehy's own notes it is reasonable to conjecture that in his praise of colonial poetry—echoing the contents of his 1853 review in part—Deniehy had perhaps over-stepped the mark. Nevertheless the *Freeman's Journal* which reported the lecture the following day was not quite so scathingly bitter. From this report it becomes clear that Deniehy had also referred to the influence of Wordsworth on Harpur but felt that Harpur 'chiefly formed his [own] style'. During the lecture, it seems, Deniehy was actually reciting verses from Harpur, especially 'The Creek of the Four Graves' and 'To an Echo on the Banks of the Hunter' and within the context it is not odd that Deniehy made the remark that 'The Creek . . .' was among the best in the whole range of verse. Deniehy had also referred to the American experience and had felt that the Australian search for a national literature may well follow a similar path. According to the *Freeman's Journal*, the only comparison to the 'greats' was apparently made in the remark: '[Harpur had] . . . earned laurels which would bear comparison with those which adorned the brows of the greatest of these poets who had sung the gentle passion from Petrarch downwards.'

In a letter to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*¹⁸ Deniehy strongly refuted that paper's report of the day before. Charging that the contents of the article were 'grossly untrue', he added that 'no opinion was expressed in the lecture that Homer and Milton *have* equals'. Nor had he compared Harpur to Homer and Milton. He conceded that Harpur had chosen Milton and Wordsworth as his models but added that he never mentioned Homer's poetry and did not say that Harpur's translations of

18. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 November 1857.

Homer were superior to Pope's.¹⁹ Yet Deniehy is unable to completely answer the reports of both the *Morning Herald* and the *Freeman's Journal* which, we have seen, wrote quite similar reviews. Deniehy's protestations make it even more clear that his final defence (i.e. that the acoustics of the hall and his own voice are partly responsible for the misrepresentation of his argument) is simply meant to camouflage the issue while keeping his own estimate of Harpur intact. One doubts if Deniehy actually believed in that estimate. My own contention, that he felt an evangelical enthusiasm was needed to resurrect Harpur's fledgling reputation, is perhaps closer the mark. Naturally, the *Sydney Morning Herald* in its "Notes of the Week"²⁰ made no retraction and simply reiterated a view which has always been responsible for much of the misunderstanding which has developed around Harpur:

It is clear, however, that he [Deniehy] lauded the Australian poet as deserving a very conspicuous niche in the temple of fame. Without saying or insinuating one word depreciatory of Mr. Harpur's talent, we may be permitted to express a doubt as to the prudence of claiming such pre-eminence for "persons and things Australian" as will assuredly be laughed at, and that most heartily, in Europe.

Harpur did not get directly involved in this controversy, quite possibly because it was all over within a week. No mention is made of the Deniehy lecture again in either the *Morning Herald* or the *Freeman's Journal*. Harpur's personal commitment to his family and the rather austere life he was leading in Jerry Plains could also account for this uncharacteristic aloofness on the part of the poet to events in Sydney. But more simply, he may not have heard of Deniehy's lecture and its aftermath till well after the hatchets had been buried. When we hear from Harpur again it is not, however, in an entirely new context. In an article called 'The "Nevers" of Poetry' published in Henry Parkes' *Empire*,²¹ he is once again the Currency Lad asking for a fair go from the colonials. This time it is Mr Fowler of the *Month* who must bear the brunt of his charges. The

19. During the 50s Harpur translated a number of pieces from Homer, in particular the famous night scene in the VIIIth book of the *Iliad* and the battle piece from the XVIIIth book of the *Iliad*. Deniehy, according to the newspaper reports, spoke very highly of these translations. In a letter to Stenhouse, Richard Rowe, author of *Peter Possum's Portfolio*, also commented favourably on these translations. For details of publication and reference to Tennyson's translations of the same passages see G.W. Salier, 'Charles Harpur's Translations from the *Iliad*', *Southerly*, 7 (1946), 218-222.

20. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 November 1857.

21. *Empire*, 9 March 1858.

poem, 'The "Nevers" of Poetry' is Harpur's contribution to 'the canonical foundation' of Australian literature on behalf of 'all who have hitherto vainly endeavoured to lay down a few of the foundation stones of an Australian literature'.²² It is Fowler's attitude to local talent which must be repudiated: '... Mr. Fowler has come hither, all the way from Fatherland, for the express purpose of founding for us *natives a national literature*, on a critical basis . . .'. Accusing Fowler of applying double standards, Harpur claimed that anything by himself or by Halloran, for example, is always considered 'defective' or 'imitative' whereas there is no limit of praise given to new English verse.²³ It seems more likely, however, that a more personal reason explains this outburst. The *Month* had refused to publish poems by Harpur in spite of the fact that earlier on in a letter to the *Month* Harpur had spoken very highly of Fowler's endeavours.

The same day, Mr. Fowler replied to Harpur's article in the 'Postscript' to the *Month*.²⁴ Interpreting Harpur's 'The "Nevers" of Poetry' as a fight by proxy employed by the editor of the *Empire* (Henry Parkes), Fowler accused the paper of harbouring 'jackals' and sycophants who could be used to pass complimentary judgments on its own editor. Yet, the *Month* scornfully retorted: '... the highest honor to which we, in our literary capacity, aspire is to be execrated in the same production in which Mr. Parkes, in *his* literary capacity, is exalted'. While the rest of the article is really a contribution to a perennial journalistic vendetta, some significant comments are made about Harpur's verse which merit attention. Maintaining that a 'critical basis' is essential for any national literature, Fowler showed that Harpur's own poem, 'The "Nevers" of Poetry' fell into the very errors it aimed at condemning; the poem breaks down on its own postulates by falling for 'Fowler's Shelley-mocking strain'.²⁵ But Fowler also demonstrates some of Harpur's strengths and weaknesses:

22. Apart from himself, Harpur also mentioned the names of the following local poets: Wentworth, Dr. Lang, Martin, Norton, Parkes, Halloran, Deniehy and Dalley.
23. Harpur also referred to Fowler's own poetry and dismissed it as verse 'so indeterminate a (in) quality, as to depend wholly for its value . . . upon the mood in which we regard it'.
24. *Month*, 1 (9 March 1858), 159-162.
25. Fowler does pick up a fundamental contradiction in Harpur's alleged poetics and his practice. Never 'turn a rich *sunset* into a red *rain*' cautions Harpur; yet he uses this very image in ll.6-8 of 'The "Nevers" of Poetry':
 True feeling rains them in unfeigned distress
 Or save when doubts that over Love may lour,
 Like summer clouds, break in a sunny shower.

We have read lines of great beauty from his pen; but grace and precision—and, what is more, musical concord—he has, of a certainty, never displayed. True poetic feeling, true poetic fervour, he possesses in an eminent degree, but he is as destitute of poetic culture just to the same extent, we should say, as he is conceited over his imaginary possession of it.

This is the first time that a reference to 'poetic culture' is made with reference to Harpur. Interpretations may vary as to its exact meaning but its importance no doubt lies in the larger cultural issues which are implicit in the statement. True, the concept of culture referred to is not Arnoldian; nevertheless the fact remains that a poet must be defined within a larger tradition of poetic continuity. Harpur had always made claims to 'culture' in his writings though that 'culture' had been consciously cultivated by the poet. His translations from Homer were perhaps another expression of it, and his natural intellectual bent simply reinforced this interest. What exactly that 'culture' meant to colonial poetry we shall never know. Was it simply an awareness of the past as Deniehy and Parkes had shown, was it a question of some form of an aristocratic expression of values or, finally, was it something which the colony couldn't possibly possess simply by virtue of its historical background? Even if answers were forthcoming, in literature at any rate, the answers themselves become enmeshed into larger issues concerning aesthetics, art and morality. The legacy of the controversy itself, however, remained, and continues to remain, a distinct feature of Australian literary history.