

## “A Genius About the Place”: The *Phoenix* Magazine and Australian modernism

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*If it is possible at this time still to feel the importance of poetry, Adelaide is now in an interesting condition. There are signs here that the imagination is stirring, and that if it has a chance it will give us something of our own. There is a genius about the place; and genius as a neighbour is exciting even at this dreadful moment.*

(C.R. Jury, *Angry Penguins* 1940)

The literary, particularly poetic, upsurge wrought by the *Angry Penguins* journal began in 1935 with *Phoenix*, centred at the University of Adelaide. The decision of the editors to change the ‘jolly old school magazine’ format of the *Adelaide University Magazine* to a completely literary journal started a seminal period in Australia’s cultural history.

*Phoenix* published works ranging from the nationalistic poetry of Rex Ingamells and the Jindyworobaks Club to the *avant-garde* modernist verse of Max Harris, D.B. Kerr and Paul Pfeiffer, with art by John Dowie and Dorrit Black, among others.

During 1940, in reaction to withdrawal of funding for *Phoenix*, Harris, Kerr, Pfeiffer and Geoffrey Dutton founded the influential *Angry Penguins* magazine which sought to promote internationalism and ‘a noisy and aggressive revolutionary modernism’ to Australian culture.

Why did the relatively conservative University of Adelaide become the ‘literary hotbed’ of Australian modernism? A faculty of some distinction, the creative support of Professors C.R. Jury and J.I.M. Stewart, a University Union which encouraged student participation and debate through the Arts Association and the student newspaper *On Dit*, the modern literature available through the newly built Barr Smith Library and Preece’s Bookshop, and the collegiality of St Mark’s College all played a role.

Max Harris and Geoffrey Dutton went on to publish *Australian Letters* which fostered collaborations between the most important artists and poets of the time. Included in the exhibition were the six Boyd paintings commissioned for the October 1961 issue of *Australian Letters* to illustrate Max Harris’s ‘The Circus and other poems.’ The paintings were donated by Harris to be held with his Papers in the Barr Smith Library. This is the only complete set of the 19 artist-poet collaborations to survive intact.

The literary energy in Adelaide between the launch of *Phoenix* in 1935 and the end of *Angry Penguins* in 1946 had an important and far-reaching influence on emerging Australian culture.

### Before *Phoenix*

The University of Adelaide in 1935

The University of Adelaide in 1935 was a relatively small and conservative campus of only 939 undergraduate and 177 post-graduate students, with an additional 262 studying at the Elder Conservatorium. The Student Union had been in existence for five years and was on sound financial footing with premises paid for and a compulsory union fee supplemented by University contributions.

Despite limitations of size and relative isolation, Adelaide had succeeded in attracting faculty of high calibre, numbering among its past and present Professors J.I.M. Stewart and C.R. Jury in English, Douglas Mawson of Geology, Kerr Grant in Physics, John McKellar Stewart in Philosophy, Gerry Portus in History, Harold Davies in Music, John Cleland in Pathology and Stanton Hicks in Physiology, J.A. Fitzherbert in Classics and Brailsford Robertson in Biochemistry.

By 1935 the University had already produced alumni of the calibre of Sir Mark Oliphant, John Bray, T.G.H. Strehlow and Howard Florey.

**Image: Aerial photograph of University of Adelaide in 1933**

Note the newly built Barr Smith Library behind the Jubilee Oval and the Exhibition Building where the Ligertwood Building now stands. Bonython Hall, the University Footbridge and the George Murray Men's Union Building with the additional cloisters are still to be built. (University Archives)



**The University of Adelaide Magazine**

The *Adelaide University Magazine* was first launched in 1918, in an era before there was a representative student body or union. The editors hoped that it would act 'as a means of self-expression and as a bond of union among students.' War and patriotism were dominant topics in the early years, before taking on the persona of a 'jolly old school magazine' in the 1920s. The early years of the 1930s saw a change in format and function to contain more creative writing to complement the student newspaper *On Dit*, launched in 1932. *On Dit* increasingly took on the role of the official organ of the student Union, announcing it was 'not a medium for the expression of soulful fancies nor the literary efforts of minor poets.'

**Preece's Bookshop**

In 1907 F.W. Preece, assisted by his sons Edgar and John Preece, launched their Adelaide bookshop with an art gallery upstairs in King William Street near the Beehive Corner. The venture was financed by a £500 loan from Robert Barr Smith which was very quickly repaid.

The shop carried a wide range of literary and art books and an impressive stock of foreign language material. The gallery exhibited controversial and modernist works. From 1929 to 1938 they published a literary magazine *Desiderata* or 'A guide to good books' which

contained notices of both Australian and overseas literature, including modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot. Preece's also published many slim volumes of poetry in the late 1930s and 1940s, including many of Rex Ingamell's Jindyworobak collections and anthologies.

As recounted by Colin Thiele in his memoirs *Pictures on the Margin* (1991), Preece's Bookshop was also used by many students as a kind of free reading room. Edgar Preece didn't mind readers standing in the corner of the shop for hours on end perusing one of the latest books. For over 50 years Preece's was a centre of literary and artistic culture in Adelaide and did much to foster cross-fertilization of modern Australian literature.

## Phoenix 1935

Editors: Maurice Finnis, Margaret McKellar Stewart, Russel Ward  
Business Manager: Robert McGowan

In June 1935 the *Adelaide University Magazine* Editorial Committee announced it was time to purge and renew the body and soul of the *Magazine* – with a new cover design by John Dowie to replace the old worn-out block and better paper to herald a better issue.

By the time of publication, the *Magazine* had been reborn as *Phoenix*. According to the editorial, it was time for a change, without apology.

The new name symbolised the transformation into a completely literary magazine. The phoenix, as depicted in the ironically German cover design by John Dowie, is a mythological bird that gains new life by arising from the ashes of its predecessor.



Contributors were either anonymous or designated by initials but many can be identified, including Margaret Mackellar Stewart, Clement Semmler, and Rex Ingamells, who were to be regular contributors. In addition to original prose, poems and art works, contributions included a recollection of Economics Professor Edward Shann by J.A. La Nauze, as well as Graduates Pages and Notes.

The Committee of the Literary, Debating and Dramatic Society awarded a prize for the best literary contribution to Margaret McKellar Stewart for her prose piece 'The Candle Flame' and poem 'Stained Glass.'

In a final appeal the editorial recognised that '*Phoenix* has not risen perfect from the ashes. It clamours for food for its continued growth.'

### Source

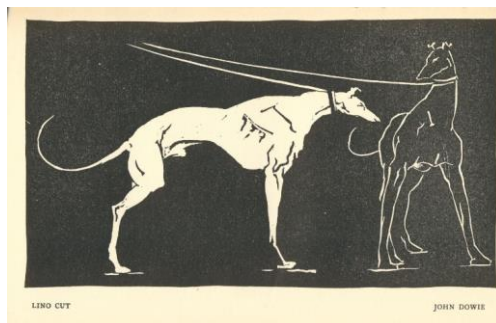
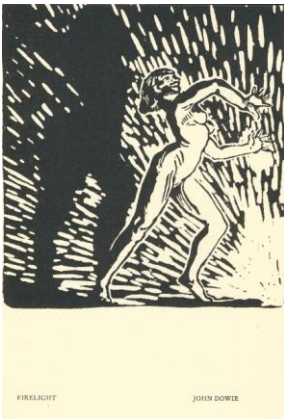
'Volume VII: an open letter' *On Dit* 21 June 1935

### John Dowie (1915–2008)

Sculptor, painter and writer, John Dowie was born in Prospect and between 1936 and 1940 studied architecture at the University of Adelaide while working as a draughtsman and studying at night at the Adelaide School of Art. In June 1940 Dowie enlisted in the Army, serving in Palestine and New Guinea, and as one of the Rats of Tobruk. For a time he worked as an assistant to Australia's official war sculptor, Lyndon Dadswell. After studying art in London and Florence, Dowie returned to Australia having adopted a more modernist style. His work includes over 50 public sculpture commissions, including the 'Three Rivers' fountain in Victoria Square, 'Alice' in Rymill Park, 'Girl on a slide' in Rundle Mall, the 'Victor Richardson Gates' at Adelaide Oval and the 'Sir Ross Smith Memorial' at Adelaide Airport, as well as many of the bronze portraits along North Terrace.

He was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1981 and nominated for Senior Australian of the Year in 2005. Dowie died on 19 March 2008, aged 93, after having suffered a stroke the week before.

Dowie contributed eight linocuts to *Phoenix* in 1935 and 1936.



## Rex Wood (1908-1970)

The Australian artist, printmaker and journalist Rex Wood was born in South Australia, and studied at the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts. At this time he and his brother Noel produced many woodcuts. Rex continued to work in this medium until he left for Europe in 1937. In London he was a pupil of Bernard Meninsky at the Central School of Arts and Crafts and later settled in Portugal.

Wood contributed two linocuts to *Phoenix* in 1935.

## Margaret McKellar Stewart

Margaret McKellar Stewart was the daughter of the late Professor John McKellar Stewart who was Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy at the University of Adelaide from 1923-1950, and Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor from 1942 to 1948. She studied for a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Adelaide in 1937, and graduated with First Class Honours in English. She was appointed a part-time tutor in the Dept of English from 1959-1973 and was then full-time Tutor in English from 1974 until December 1978.

She had fond memories of her years as a student, as recalled in an interview in Lumen in 2007:

It was very 'matey' ... We had great friendships. We were very relaxed down in the Union, and little by little... the (new) buildings came into place, and that was very exciting. Her book *The Lower Level: a discursive history of The Adelaide University Union* (1975) was published by the Adelaide University Union in 1975.

Commented [CH1]:

McKellar Stewart was a regular contributor to *Phoenix* and became editor from 1935 to 1937. She married Maurice Finnis, also an Adelaide graduate of 1937 with a Bachelor of Arts and fellow editor of *Phoenix* in 1935.

## Critical reception

Although *The Advertiser* gave a favourable review, calling *Phoenix* a credit to the Hassell Press, not all reactions were favourable.

A long letter published anonymously by Mr C.H. Mercer, although recognising that the old Magazine was 'plainly moribund' and 'dull beyond hope', complained that *Phoenix* was 'an ill-conceived affectation, an imitation of [the] worthless literary fashions' of the modernist movement. Individual contributions were accused of 'pointless debauch in a perverted instinct', of 'wallowing in abnormal or at least murky psychology', and of being an 'expression of sex-crucified pruriency' or 'idiotic rambling.' Another letter, 'The Balance Sheet', claimed that the writer should be credited with the 1 shilling magazine cost from his Union fee for removing the abortion of the last issue from the University.

## Sources

'Publications Reviewed', *The Advertiser* 9 November 1935. (*University Archives*)  
'*Phoenix*', [letter by C.H. Mercer], *On Dit* 1 May 1936

'Balance Sheet', letter by 'Hayes', *On Dit* 2 April 1936  
'Phoenix'. Letter by 'Iam Speraus', *On Dit* 7 June 1936

## Phoenix 1936

Editors: Herbert Piper, Margaret McKellar Stewart, Russel Ward  
Business Manger: Elliott Johnston

The 1936 issue of *Phoenix* was now sub-titled the 'Literary Issue of the *Adelaide University Magazine*.' Contributors abandoned the use of initials and published under their own names. Graduates' Pages continued to feature news of alumni.

The editorial stated that "The first issue of *Phoenix* served its purpose well. The magazine was for once read before it was criticised, and this year it has attracted a larger and more varied amount of work."



### 'FOR SO HE GIVETH HIS BELOVED SLEEP'

I saw you lie there, calm and still,  
With all life's loveliness around you spread,  
Radiant with purity, sweeter still,—  
Though you were dead.

Through all the weary weight of days,  
The crushing bitterness of hopes decayed,  
You had to live, with few to know  
The price you paid.

ANON.

#### From *Phoenix* 1936:

'The Skaters' / linocut by John Dowie

'For so he giveth his beloved sleep', poem contributed anonymously by D.B. Kerr as a 16 year old before entering university

#### Arts Association

In 1936 the Literary, Dramatic & Debating Club changed its name to the Arts Association. The Association included among its members many of the editors and contributors to *Phoenix*. The Arts Association held lively meetings which hosted regular debates and talks and often closed with a short play. Topics discussed included censorship, the foundation of an Adelaide nudist club, inheritance in man, the psychology of the ego and the id, Imagist poetry, and modern drama and poetry (especially T.S. Eliot), while in 1935 the experimental composer Percy Grainger talked to the Association for an entire evening.

While most literary debate focussed on modernist authors and trends, in 1936 Rex Ingamells spoke on Australian poetry and how "Australian poets must try and introduce new

adjectives to suit scenery that was different from anything about which English poets had ever written.”

### **Elliott Johnston (1918-2011)**

Lawyer and reformist, Elliott Johnston was the first member of the Communist Party to be appointed to the Supreme Court in Australia, and later an Associate Professor of Law at Flinders University, and head of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody from 1989-1991.

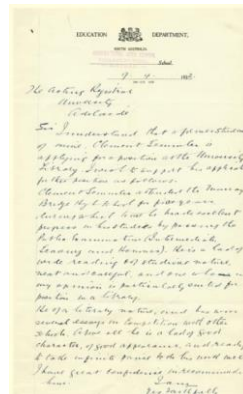
While a student at the University of Adelaide, he was a member of the Peace Group, served as an editor of *On Dit* and was associated with both *Phoenix* and *Angry Penguins*.

*At one stage I was also business manager of the Phoenix, you may think that an impressive title, but it usually meant being the one to run around and get half a dozen advertisers! (As reported to John Miles, The Lost Angry Penguins. Crawford House, 2000)*

### **Clement Semmler (1914-2000)**

Clement Semmler was born of German parents in Eastern Well, near Mercunda, South Australia. He received a Master of Arts degree from the University of Adelaide and a Doctor of Letters degree from the University of New England. He was the Deputy Manager of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) for many years, was a member of the Australian Society of Authors and was made a Fellow of the New South Wales Institute of Arts. He published an autobiography, essays, biographies, criticism, short stories, worked as an editor, and contributed poetry to *Phoenix* from 1935 to 1937.

He was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for his services to Australian Literature.



#### **Image:**

Reference by A.R. Hilton, former head of Murray Bridge High School, for Semmler applying for position of junior assistant in the Library, 9/4/1932 (*University Archives*)

### **Phoenix 1937**

Editors: R.A. Blackburn, Margaret McKellar Stewart and Victor C. Matison  
Business Manger: R.L. Cotton

*Phoenix* 1937 introduced a new cover design by one of the editors, R.A. Blackburn, and included full page pictorial advertisements for the first time. Rex Ingamells was appointed as Graduates' Union representative on *Phoenix* staff and supplied a report on Graduates Week.

A favourable review in *The Advertiser* 16 October 1937 praised the “fine selection of poems, articles and short stories” by Rex Ingamells, Margaret McKellar Stewart, H.W. Piper, Molly Swan, and Clement Semmler, and described at length J.A. La Nauze’s provocative article ‘A new way to waste money’ which attacked Australian insularity. Particular praise was awarded to Professor C.R. Jury’s outstanding ‘Ode for the City of Adelaide.’

*On Dit* recognised that *Phoenix* was the place for ‘serious literary work’ while an article by the editor ‘What’s wrong with *Phoenix* anyway?’ reflected on critics who derided the concept of previous issues as ignorant of developments of similar magazines in Melbourne and Sydney. A plea for contributions maintained that “Phoenix is not the sacred preserve and asylum of our honours English ‘intellectuals’” and begged “Don’t let the English school have it all their own way.”

#### Sources

Review, *The Advertiser* 16 October 1937 (*University Archives*)  
‘What’s Wrong with *Phoenix* Anyway?’ *On Dit* 22 June 1937

#### War and Peace

Post-World War I exhaustion had produced numerous student societies and groups whose main aim was relaxation through dances, revues and sport. In the mid-thirties, European events began to make an impact on students - the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy against the power of communism in the East was worrying, while the Spanish civil war and the destruction of the Basque town of Guernica by German bombers (and its depiction by Picasso) was horrifying.

By 1937 the prospect of another global conflict had become more a question of when, not if. Peace groups had been formed; Archibald Grenfell Price, Master of St Mark’s, warned of the dangers of an imperialistic and expansionist Japan; and there was a general feeling that war of terrible magnitude was to come and anger from the young at the lack of action by the older generation.

#### Sources

‘War scare’, *On Dit* 3 May 1935  
‘Peace ballot’, *On Dit* 26 June 1936

#### John La Nauze (1911–1990)

John Andrew La Nauze was born at Boulder in Western Australia and completed degrees in Arts at the University of Western Australia and (as WA Rhodes Scholar for 1931) at Oxford.

His South Perth neighbour, Professor Edward Shann, had persuaded him to undertake a second major in economics at Oxford and in 1935 La Nauze was recruited as assistant-lecturer in economics to the University of Adelaide, where his mentor Shann held the chair. Shann’s fatal plunge from a study window four months later shook his young assistant—for La Nauze



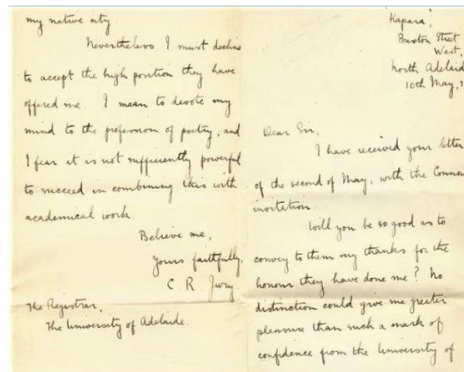
was convinced it was suicide; he then assisted the family and took on most of Shann's teaching duties.

La Nauze then moved to the Economics Departments at Sydney (1940-49) and in 1950 became Foundation Professor of Economic History in the University of Melbourne, moving to the newly created Ernest Scott Chair in the Department of History in 1956. In 1966 he succeeded Sir Keith Hancock as Professor of History in the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University. On his retirement in 1977 he became the first Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard in 1978.

### Charles Rischbieth Jury (1893-1958)

C.R. Jury was born in Glenelg and educated at Glenelg Grammar School and at the Collegiate School of St Peter's. In 1913 he left school to go to Oxford and, after being badly wounded during WWI, graduated with an M.A. in 1923 and lived in England, Sicily and Greece but often returned to Australia. He settled permanently in Adelaide in 1938. During WWII he served in Army intelligence.

In 1921 his mother funded the Jury Chair of English Language and Literature in honour of her husband, in the expectation that her son would take up the post. However, Charles already had an independent income and declined the offer, preferring to devote his time to the writing of poetry. In 1932 he was tutor at St Mark's College, and in 1933 relieving lecturer in English at Adelaide. In 1946 he finally took up the Jury Chair of English and held the position until 1949. He then retired to live in North Adelaide and continue his writing.



Jury's first collection of poetry was published when he was twelve years old. He made no attempt to follow modern fashions, writing mainly on classical themes and often in dramatic verse which was controlled and polished. He acknowledged that he was out of touch with his time and that this was a serious concern, but not enough to change the writing style that he loved. He was however an unqualified supporter of his undergraduate students' attraction to modernism.

He exerted a considerable influence on the cultural life of Adelaide, recognising and generously encouraging literary and artistic talent and providing financial assistance to struggling authors as well as the embattled *Phoenix* magazine in 1939 and *Angry Penguins* in 1940. Jury's knowledge of current critical theory was slight, but his understanding of and love for literature was profound.

His students remembered him with affection: he was courteous, kind and generous, reasonable and self-aware, with a sense of humour.

Image

Letter from C.R. Jury to The Registrar 10 May 1921, declining chair 'to devote my mind to the profession of poetry' (*University Archives*)

### **James Innes Mackintosh Stewart (1906-1994)**

J.I.M. Stewart was Professor of English at the University of Adelaide 1935-1945, the youngest professor ever appointed. Unlike his predecessor Professor Strong, Stewart taught 'the Moderns,' including Eliot, Auden, and Spender, and allowed students to borrow his copy of Joyce's *Ulysses* when it was re-banned in Australia in 1941. Stewart was instrumental in establishing the study of Australian literature at universities, delivering the first lectures on Australian literature at Adelaide and appointing Brian Elliott as 'Lecturer in Australian Literature' in 1943, the first position of its kind.

His memoirs indicate that he looked down on most of what he experienced in Australia, but he did think highly of some of his undergraduates and encouraged them both in their study of English literature and in their own writing. His students admired his flamboyance, some imitating his rakish dress and his pipe.

Stewart was drawn into the famous Ern Malley affair when Max Harris, the editor of *Angry Penguins* and a former student of Stewart's, sought his opinion on the poems. He also testified in defence of Harris when charges of obscenity were brought against him.

Stewart also established an international reputation as a creative writer, publishing twelve crime-fiction novels during his ten years in Adelaide under the pseudonym of Michael Innes, as well as literary criticism under his own name. In 1946, he left Australia, with what one friend called feelings of 'relief and liberation' for an appointment at Queen's College, Belfast.

#### **Source**

'Professor J.I.M. Stewart makes debut', *On Dit* 11 May 1937

## ***Phoenix* 1938**

Editors: Helen Wighton, Finlay Crisp  
Business Manager: John Jenkins

1938 saw the opening of the George Murray Men's Union building, and the editors of *On Dit* looking forward to a Union of 'intelligent and original beings, not nit-wits.'

The 1938 *Phoenix* reverted to the John Dowie cover design. Graduate Notes were moved from the magazine into a special issue of *On Dit*. 'Urgers' or faculty representatives were appointed to encourage contributions from areas other than the English faculty. Contributions were plentiful, including poems from the regular contributors Margaret McKellar Stewart, Rex Ingamells, Molly Swan and D.B. Kerr. Three reviews on the mathematical writings of Lancelot Hogben were supplied by E.H. Mercer, J.A. La Nauze and H.W. Piper. Artworks included a reproduction of a watercolour view through the completed cloisters by W. Bennett, photographs by Alan Pilgrim and linocuts by A. Stephens and G. Wallman.

The editors of *Phoenix* handed back part of the Union grant to be used for the publication of *On Dit*. Only £6/10/5 was used of the £53 grant due to the efforts of Mr Jenkins, the Business Manager, securing so many advertisements that the magazine virtually paid for itself.

#### Sources

'*Phoenix*, 1938.' *On Dit* 26 July 1938

'*Phoenix*, 1938. Under entirely new management.' *On Dit* 12 April 1938

#### H.M. (Molly) Swan

Molly Swan was an Arts graduate of the University of Adelaide and later a social worker. She contributed poems to *Phoenix* in 1937, 1938 and 1939 and was also published in *Angry Penguins* and Flexmore Hudson's *Poetry* magazine. Her work was influenced by Kafka, Rilke and the modern symbolists.

C.R. Jury described Swan's poem 'Collage' as "collocations in sound and sense that simultaneously pile up a necessary image, convey a unified emotion and are beautiful in themselves" (*Southerly*, v. 1 no. 2 April 1940)

#### Rex Ingamells (1913-1955) and the Jindyworobaks Club

Rex Ingamells founded the Jindyworobak Club in 1938, publishing with Ian Tilbrook *Conditional Culture* as their manifesto. They promoted an assertive nationalism by which Australian literature should avoid European tradition and proclaim its identity through distinctively Australian language and landscape, with special emphasis placed on Aboriginal culture and vocabulary. The word 'Jindyworobak', meaning to join or annex, was taken from James Devaney's *The Vanished Tribes* published in 1929.

After completing a B.A. in History at the University of Adelaide and failing to gain an academic position, Rex Ingamells worked as a teacher, freelance journalist and publisher's representative. He began writing short stories and poems in 1930 and by 1936 was seriously exploring the ideas that would establish the Jindyworobak Movement. While not widely admired for his poetry today, Ingamells attracted some positive attention in the 1940s, winning the Grace Leven Prize for *The Great South Land* (1945). His Jindyworobak philosophy attracted a variety of writers, including Flexmore Hudson, Colin Thiele, Judith Wright, Gwen Harwood, and Geoffrey Dutton and Max Harris (in the early years).

Between 1938 and 1953 Ingamells produced annual Jindyworobak anthologies published by Preece's of Adelaide. The movement was bitterly attacked by some mainstream critics for being narrow or even xenophobic in outlook, and it ceased to exist by the end of the 1950s. Rex Ingamells was killed in a car accident in 1955.

#### Sources

'Adelaide, too, has its poets' (Review of *Jindyworobak Anthology*, 1939) *The Advertiser* 23 December 1939 (*University Archives*)

'The Jindyworobak Club', *Venture* v. 1 no. 1 (April 1939)

*Phoenix* 1938: 'Earth colours' / Rex Ingamells, with photograph 'Australian bush' by Alan Pilgrim on facing page

### Max Harris vs the Jindyworobaks

Max Harris, to many people's later surprise, was involved with the Jindyworobaks Club at its beginning, acting as secretary and publishing his first book of verse, *The Gift of Blood*, under the Jindyworobak imprint. Most local Adelaide poets of the 1930s and 40s published across the 'ideological spectrum' – in Jindyworobak anthologies and in Flexmore Hudson's journal *Poetry*, which achieved a degree of international recognition, as well as interstate magazines such as *Meanjin* and *Southerly*.

By the 1941 issue of *Angry Penguins* Harris directly opposed the movement: under the heading 'We disapprove' he wrote "All Jindyworobaks – May they all go to Alcheringa."

By 1948, in 'The importance of disagreeing' in the *Jindyworobak Review 1938-1948* (Melbourne: Jindyworobak, 1948) Harris had arrived at a more reasoned approach:

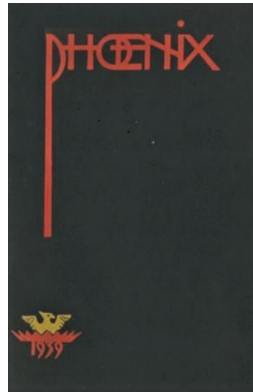
The aesthetic of the Jindyworobak movement does not contain the whole truth, no more than the aesthetic of the *Angry Penguins* is THE only valid view of literature. But each, in its own right, has added something of its own to the total dynamic of literary activity in Australia.

Seen in an historical perspective, the contribution of Rex Ingamells has been the most important. For his theory set into action the whole resurgent movement of poetry in Australia ...

## Phoenix 1939

Editors: D.B. Kerr, Molly Swan and C.B. Ashton  
Business Manager: J.L. Gouge

Issued in a slightly larger size, *Phoenix* 1939 began with a slightly apologetic statement by the President of the Adelaide University Union that too much had been expected of *Phoenix* "and the work published has thus been judged, not on its own merits, but by comparison with the work of writers more experienced ..." and that it should be remembered that it was "an almost purely undergraduate production, and as such it should be judged."



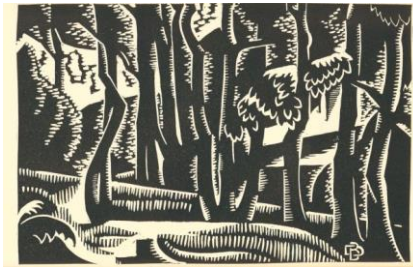
Contributions included the ambitious and modernist writings of D.B. Kerr, Paul Pfeiffer and Max Harris. C.R. Jury in his Preface remarked that:

This number of *Phoenix* has an atmosphere of modernness that I like ... I mean [modernness] here to cover not only the absence in most of these poems of the continual end-rhymes, highly regularized rhythm, and explicitness one expects in conservative poetry, but the kinds of subjects treated and the methods of treatment ... The best of them show not only a decided grasp of form but a delightful creative sensitiveness to language.

1939 proved to be the most significant issue in the light of its impact on Australian literary culture, and also the final issue until later revival in 1946.

#### Image

Lino-cut by Dorrit Black, from the original 'Gum trees' c 1933, original held by Art Gallery of SA



#### Sources

Extract from interview with D.B. Kerr as Union candidate, *On Dit* 25 September 1939

'Latest number of *Phoenix*' (Review) *Advertiser* 1939 (*University Archives*)

'*Phoenix* (A contributed review)' by C.R. Jury, *Southerly* v. 1 no. 2 (April 1940)

'Hail and farewell' (letter to the Editor) by D.B. Kerr, *On Dit* 30 April 1940

#### D.B. (Sam) Kerr (1919-1942)

D. B. Kerr was educated at St Peter's College and entered the University of Adelaide in 1937, boarding at St Mark's College from 1938 and serving as Secretary and President of the Arts Association. At St Mark's and during his studies he befriended Paul Pfeiffer, Colin Thiele, Max Harris and Geoffrey Dutton, and was encouraged in his studies and his poetry by Professors C.R. Jury and J.I.M. Stewart. Described as his peers as handsome, charming and gifted; an Adonis, and a beautiful youth; and 'Byronic' by Jury, Kerr was kind, sensitive, of great intelligence, talented at sports, with a tongue-in-cheek sense of humour.



Kerr was still at St Peter's College when he started publishing poetry, and was first published in *Phoenix* in 1936, a year before entering university. Jury highly praised Kerr's poetry as being 'almost classical in form.'

In 1939 Kerr progressed from editor of *On Dit* to editor of *Phoenix* and was then one of the founding editors of *Angry Penguins*. An obituary for Kerr in *Angry Penguins* 1943 lamented: "in his death we record the loss of one of Australia's greatest poets" while the American journal *Voices* in 1944 described Kerr as "the first outstanding poet of the [Australian] modern movement."

#### Image

D.B. Kerr ca. 1940. *D.B. Kerr Papers, Rare Books & Manuscripts MSS 0102*

#### Sources

*Death be not Proud* (Adelaide: Hassell Press, 1943), published posthumously by Max Harris, with 'Biographical note.' Title from Kerr's favourite poem by John Donne

'Poem' by D.B. Kerr, from *Phoenix* 1939

Comment from interview with candidates for election to Men's Union Committee, *On Dit* 25 September 1939

Letter 21/1/1943 from Casualty Section, Dept of Air, South Yarra, to Mrs M.J. Kerr with information regarding the circumstances of Kerr's death. *D.B. Kerr Papers, Rare Books & Manuscripts MSS 0102*

'Elegiac for Donald Kerr' by Max Harris (typescript). *Max Harris Papers, Rare Books & Manuscripts MSS 92 H315p*

### **Dorrit Black (1891-1951)**

Dorrit Black showed early signs of talent, excelling in writing, drawing and painting throughout her school years in Adelaide. She went on to study at the former South Australian School of Arts and Crafts and, at the age of 23, moved to Sydney to continue her exploration of the arts and painting, eventually teaching part-time.

Black spent several years in London and Paris studying with some of Europe's esteemed modernist artists before moving back to Sydney in 1929. It was at this time she began promoting linocut art in Australia and the prints she produced are considered to be the most accomplished of any Australian artists of that era. Returning to Adelaide in 1934, she taught at the School of Art and influenced a whole generation of students during the 1940s. Black also exhibited with artists of John Reed's *avant-garde* circle, and in 1942 was a founding member of the SA branch of the Contemporary Art Society with Max Harris.

Ian North has described Black as "an evangelist of the modern movement in Australia" with a "feeling for the landscape as a tangible reality experienced through all the senses."

### **Max Harris (1921-1995)**

Max Harris was born in Adelaide and lived in Mt Gambier until he won a scholarship to attend St Peter's College where he distinguished himself in sports and academia.

Before entering the University of Adelaide in 1939, Harris worked as a copy boy at the Adelaide *News* and had his poetry published in the first *Jindyworobak Anthology*. The Jindyworobak Club published Harris's first book of poetry, *The Gift of Blood*, in 1940 but he was impatient with the limits of the Jindyworobak movement and immersed himself in modernism and the *avant-garde*, experimenting with forms of poetry.



Harris published a number of volumes of poetry and prose and one experimental novel, *The Vegetative Eye*, in his lifetime, but he is best-known as a columnist and for his part in establishing *Angry Penguins*, *Australian Letters* and the *Australian Book Review*.

Harris's contribution to Australian culture has been significant. As long-time owner of Adelaide's Mary Martin bookshop, Harris participated actively in the city's literary circles. This influence was extended in the 1960s when he began a thirty-year career as writer and columnist for several newspapers and periodicals, including the *Australian*, Adelaide's *Sunday Mail* and the *Bulletin*. Throughout his life Harris was regarded as an *enfant terrible*

and iconoclast, rebelling against conventional culture and promoting internationalism in the arts.

#### Image

Max Harris, *Max Harris Papers, Rare Books & Manuscripts MSS 92 H315p*

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'Retrospect 1939', typescript poem, *Max Harris Papers, Rare Books & Manuscripts MSS 92 H315p*

*The Gift of Blood* (Adelaide: Jindyworobak Club, 1940)

'Book announcement', *On Dit* 14 May 1940

#### Paul Pfeiffer (1916-1945)

Paul Pfeiffer, the youngest son of a farming family, started school at Australia Plain near Eudunda. He later boarded at Immanuel College in Adelaide, where he also taught while attending the University of Adelaide. He was awarded a B.A. in 1938, Honours in 1939 and a Masters in 1940. In his first years at University, Pfeiffer played an active role in the Arts Association but ceased involvement after 1937 due to his other commitments. In 1940 he became a resident tutor at St Mark's College and won the Bunday Prize for English Verse for his poem, 'Spain', about the Spanish Civil War.



He became firm friends with D.B. Kerr, Max Harris and the other young emerging writers, contributing to *Phoenix* in 1939. In his obituary in the 1945 issue of *Angry Penguins*, Pfeiffer was acknowledged by Harris as 'a creating force':

At the beginning of the war, *Angry Penguins* came into being. Donald Beviss Kerr, Paul Pfeiffer, and I created this channel of expression because we each felt we had something to say.

A linguist, scholar, and born educator, Pfeiffer could be withdrawn and seemingly aloof, but had an underlying passion and strength. Charles Jury described his poetry as 'perfect art' and thought 'At the Window' one of the best short poems he had known.

In July 1940 Pfeiffer enlisted in the RAAF, was called up in March 1941 and served in Rhodesia, Northern Ireland, Southern England and the Mediterranean. Pfeiffer was tragically killed while on a training flight over Scotland.

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[Critique of 'At the window' from C.R. Jury review] *Southerly* v. 1 no. 2 (April 1940)

*Hymeneal to a Star* by Paul Pfeiffer (The Adelaide University Arts Association, 1942) Publication posthumously supervised by Max Harris

#### At the Window

The last dismantled star flung into space,  
In swift gradations  
Night ripens into day.  
Thought patterns flailed like octopus  
Dichotomize,  
Hen-coop cocks crow up the dawn ...  
'The gutteral goose hath ushered in the day!'

[Letter from Pfeiffer to The Registrar, University of Adelaide, 23 March 1940 re his choice of M.A. topic and his tutorship at St Mark's College] (*University Archives*)

### St Mark's College

St Mark's College, the oldest of the residential Colleges associated with The University of Adelaide, opened its doors to students in 1925.

Archibald Grenfell Price, Master at St Mark's at the time, was a pioneer in Australian history and geography, an inspiration to students and encouraged discussion and debate.

Sam (D.B.) Kerr, Paul Pfeiffer, Max Harris, Geoffrey Dutton, Colin Thiele and the Ingamells brothers Rex and John, Flexmore Hudson, Ian Mudie and C.R. Jury, all had associations with St Mark's. Though several were not resident students or tutors, most at one time or other were attracted to gatherings as described by John Miles:

The poets, a description that fitted almost everyone in the group, met periodically in Paul Pfeiffer's rooms at St Mark's, the university residential college. These were volatile meetings, yeasty with poetry and intense with argument about literature, art and international politics. Claret of doubtful vintage tended to illuminate the debates early in the evening but blurred them after midnight. As clarity of thought and speech diminished, vehemency intensified, until some of the more passionate orators were in danger of being thrown out (*Lost Angry Penguins*, p. viii)

A photograph of St Mark's College undergraduates and tutors of 1940 includes D.B. Kerr (third from left in the top row) and Geoffrey Dutton (eighth from left, third row.) Pfeiffer was at militia training and missed the end of year photograph - otherwise it would have been an historic photo of three of the Angry Penguins together

## Angry Penguins 1940

In 1939, under Kerr's editorship, *Phoenix* had reached its peak as a collection of new and radical work, incurring the wrath of conservative elements within the University – described by Geoffrey Dutton as “philistines ... a mob spearheaded by sports heavies and engineers.”

In 1940 the ‘philistines’ stacked the Student Union and withdrew funding from *Phoenix*. The move was made to establish *Angry Penguins* under the aegis of the Arts Association which granted a token sum of £3/0/0 with additional financial assistance from Professors Jury and Stewart, and Max Harris's mother. An editorial committee was appointed consisting of D.B. Kerr and Max Harris as editors, with P.G. Pfeiffer and G. Dutton, and Misses M. Swan, A. Hogben and J. Murray as sub-editors (although the issue only cited Kerr and Harris as editors).

The title was suggested by C.R. Jury who interrupted Harris reading his poem ‘Mithridatum of Despair’ at a line which described drunks in evening suits as “the angry penguins of the night” – proclaiming “That's exactly what you young iconoclasts are – angry penguins.”



*Angry Penguins* was produced as 'an act of defiance', according to a Note at the start of the journal which prophetically concluded "whether good or bad the magazine itself is infinitely more important than disturbances which lie behind it."

The contents included works by Geoffrey Dutton, Max Harris, Rex Ingamells, D.B. Kerr and Paul Pfeiffer, as well as the Queensland poet Brian Vrepon. The first issue attracted not only campus-based opposition but also criticism from the 'old guard' as being incoherent and unintelligible, as well as positive praise from the *Sydney Morning Herald* as "a very interesting anthology which the editors threaten to continue as a magazine."

#### **Source**

The Arts Association. Minutes of the Annual General Meeting 7th April 1940 (in D.B. Kerr's handwriting as retiring secretary) (*University Archives*)

#### **Two poets**

The first issue of *Angry Penguins* in 1940 was introduced with a long appreciation of Paul Pfeiffer and Max Harris by C.R. Jury. Commenting that "the imagination is stirring" and "there is a genius about the place", Jury gave a personal and critical assessment of the two very different poets' works.

Paul Pfeiffer, the older but less published, is judged as 'near his best' with a precision and contemporaneousness of language. Max Harris, the younger but more extensively published, is praised for his passion and splendid expression, and for his seriousness and complexity of his purpose, but regrets his tendency to turgidity and lack of control: "I am impressed by the dust and heat, but I do not really grasp what it is all about."

While in complete sympathy and agreement with the modernism of these young poets, Jury gently chides himself as being slow and having unsatisfactory understanding of Harris's ideas:

these remarks have no claim to be a review either of Paul Pfeiffer or of Max Harris. They are written in acknowledgement, and as an indication that I have perceived what is happening in Adelaide and to Adelaide. At my age and at this time it is easier to see oneself sitting in judgement on the work of the young than to produce something of one's own.

#### **Geoffrey Dutton (1922-1998)**

Geoffrey Dutton was one of the most prolific, versatile and talented writers in the literary history of Australia. Born in 1922 at Anlaby, the oldest stud sheep station in South Australia near Kapunda, Dutton was educated at Geelong Grammar, The University of Adelaide (he interrupted his studies to enlist with the RAAF, where he became a flying instructor) and Oxford University. As an undergraduate at the University of Adelaide he was associated with the *Angry Penguins* group where he published some of his first poems.

After Oxford he toured Europe and returned to Adelaide where, before embarking on a full-time writing career, he lectured in English between 1955 and 1962. Dutton's first publication

in 1944 was a book of poetry, but he followed that with a diverse range of writing, including novels, criticism, biographies, travel writing, art appreciation and children's writing.

Dutton was founding editor of Penguin Australia in 1962 and became co-founder of Sun Books, *Australian Letters* and the *Australian Book Review*. He was also founding editor of the *Bulletin Literary Supplement* and, later, of the *Australian Literary Magazine*. He was an enthusiastic advocate of government funding of the arts and largely responsible for the establishment of the Adelaide Festival of the Arts. He was awarded the high distinction of Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1976.

Geoffrey Dutton passed away in Canberra in September 1998. In the months before his death he chronicled the immediate effects of his severe stroke and subsequent recovery in the neurology ward of the New York in *New York Nowhere*, a major poem of seventy-five hundred words

## ***Angry Penguins 1941-1942***

*Angry Penguins* Number 2 continued its patronage by the Arts Association in 1941 but lost all pretence of being a university publication: "This is not, as can be seen, a students' product, but is culled from amongst the most vital literary talent in the Commonwealth. It is merely a welcome exception that the magazine is student-sponsored by the Adelaide University Arts Association."

It contained poetry by Geoffrey Dutton, Max Harris, R. Brewster Jones, C.R. Jury, D.B. Kerr, Paul Pfeiffer and Molly Swan, and printed the first part of Alister Kershaw's 'Lands in Force' in entirety for the first time. The Contemporary Art Society provided art blocks for reproductions of works by James Gleeson and Sydney Nolan. With Kerr away on war service, Harris assumed sole editorship. In his editorial preface he claimed: "I believe that this is the only literary publication in Australia which is alive; contemporaneous in spirit and idiom."

*Angry Penguins* Number 3 severed the connection with the Arts Association and, following the death of D.B. Kerr, was edited by Max Harris with the support of J.I.M. Stewart, J.R. Cornell, John Reed of the Contemporary Art Society, Geoffrey Dutton and Mary Martin, among others. "It is my intention to publish this magazine whenever, and only when funds and material, that is, interest and the quality of work submitted, demand it."

It fostered co-operation between artists and writers: "the co-operation between artist and writer, as has never existed in this country before, is indicative of a greater degree of intellectual interaction within our class. It augers a popular front to develop and implement a culture virile enough to survive the impacts of war."

In addition to poetry of some merit, this number contained a comment on Franz Kafka and a review by John Reed of Reg S. Ellery's *Schizophrenia*.

## ***Angry Penguins 1942-46***

From the second issue of 1942, *Angry Penguins* eventually became an independent magazine edited by Harris in collaboration with John Reed. The 'Transition number' 4 saw a change from a literary anthology to "a literary and art journal proper."

Melbourne lawyer and arts patron John Reed had sought out Harris in Adelaide, suggesting a collaboration in publishing the journal. Harris, active in trying to establish a Contemporary Art Society in South Australia, was lured to the Reeds' Melbourne arts colony at Heide where Sidney Nolan was the primary artist under Reed's patronage. Nolan later became an active member of the editorial team. Other artists such as Albert Tucker, Joy Hester, James Gleeson, Arthur Boyd and John Perceval also came under the wing of *Angry Penguins*.

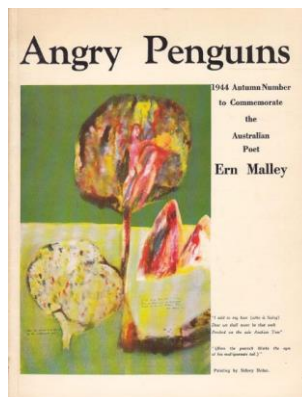
Authors included the poets Geoffrey Dutton, Alister Kershaw and Hal Porter along with works by Dylan Thomas, Gabriel García Márquez, James Dickey and the American poet Harry Roskolenko. In 1945 *Angry Penguins* published poems by Kerr and Pfeiffer for the last time.

The journal was dominated by the creative energy of Max Harris and promoted internationalism and 'a noisy and aggressive revolutionary modernism' and internationalism. Nothing of its like has been seen since.

#### **Ern Malley hoax (1944)**

The obscurity and seeming lack of meaning of modernist verse prompted passionate criticism from their conservative contemporaries who were outraged by the success of *Angry Penguins* with its progressive content and promotion of surrealism.

The poet and critic A.D. Hope inspired two young poets serving in the army, Harold Stewart and James McAuley, to "get Maxy". Under the name of Ern Malley, they crafted a series of poems by opening books at random and choosing words or phrases haphazardly, to see if the *Angry Penguins* could distinguish between poetry that was 'a collection of garish images without coherent meaning and structure' and the real thing. The poems were accompanied by a letter from the poet's 'sister', Ethel Malley, explaining that Ern had died of Graves' disease and she did not know if the poems were any good so she was giving them to Harris to do what he wished with them.



Harris thought the poems were brilliant and, supported by his colleagues, published 16 of the poems in the 1944 edition of *Angry Penguins* under the title 'The Darkening Ecliptic' with a special cover by Sydney Nolan.

The poems were controversial but well received until the Sydney Sunday Sun revealed the deception and McAuley and Stewart admitted to the hoax. The debate about the hoax was quickly overshadowed when Max Harris was brought to trial for publishing the Ern Malley poems, labelled by police as 'indecent, immoral, or obscene'. Harris was convicted and was

fined £5 in lieu of six weeks' imprisonment. He never wavered in his belief in the quality of the poetry, and Ern Malley's poetry continues to be published and studied. *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* (1992) selected all of Malley's poems for inclusion in their anthology.

*Angry Penguins* ceased publication in 1946 after only six short years. Despite the Ern Malley hoax, it remains one of the most significant creative arts publications to be published in Australia

#### Image

Cover: *Angry Penguins* 1944 "Autumn number to commemorate the Australian poet Ern Malley"

## **Australian Letters**

*Australian Letters*, 'a quarterly review of writing and criticism', was launched in Adelaide in 1957. Max Harris, co-owner of the Mary Martin Bookshop, poet Geoffrey Dutton and Bryn Davies (both members of the English Department at Adelaide University) were its initial editors. In 1963, on Davies's resignation, Rosemary Wighton joined the team, the only woman involved in editing a literary magazine in Australia at that time.

It was one of a flourishing population of literary magazines that included *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Quadrant* and *Westerly*. Committed to openness and eclecticism, *Australian Letters* was proud of its political and intellectual independence and its financial success as 'a quarterly which pays its own way' (Editorial, July 1960).

The journal's most significant innovation was the series of 19 artist-poet collaborations it commissioned from 1960 as 'artistic meditations ... on the themes of the poets.' The collaborations included the partnerships of Russell Drysdale and David Campbell, Donald Friend and Douglas Stewart, Leonard French and James McAuley, Sidney Nolan and Randolph Stow, and Arthur Boyd with Max Harris.

The six Arthur Boyd paintings commissioned for the October 1961 issue of *Australian Letters* to illustrate poems by Max Harris, entitled 'The Circus and other poems' are now held by the Barr Smith Library and are the only complete set still together.

Instead of the *Angry Penguins* promotion of international modernism, *Australian Letters* aimed to promote a new kind of Australianism, of 'cultural self-containedness ... neither nationalistic not anti-nationalistic' (Max Harris. "*Angry Penguins* and After" *Quadrant* v. 7, 1963, p. 7)

## **1946-1950 revival of Phoenix**

*Phoenix* rose again in 1946, the same year that *Angry Penguins* ceased, and returned to a University focus. It published poetry by undergraduates (including Douglas Muecke), University staff (C.R. Jury) and others such as later Professor of Philosophy at Flinders

University, Brian Medlin (possibly contributed by his then undergraduate brother Harry Medlin). Essays returned, including a piece by David Kerr (D.B. Kerr's brother) entitled 'Be lavish with time' about evolution. Other essay titles included "Sterilisation of the unfit" by the Professor of Anatomy A.A. Abbie, "Biography without tears" by lecturer Brian Elliott, and "Some notes on the staging of French medieval mysteries" and an account of the N.U.A.U.S. Drama Festival held in Melbourne.

No edition was published in 1947. The 1948 and 1949 editions continued in the same vein as 1946 with poetry, essays and articles, as well as the inaugural address by the Vice-Chancellor A.P. Rowe. 1949 did include two poems by Max Harris "The yielding rain" and "General" (from the German of Erick Kaestner). 1950 saw the last issue of *Phoenix*.

**AUM / Adelaide University Magazine** was revived by the Students' Representative Council in 1953 in various forms and frequencies until 1957, but continued to rely heavily on staff and graduate contributions rather than students, and contained more articles of University and general interest rather than literary contributions.

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