

## **A LUSTY VIGOROUS LIFE OF ITS OWN**

Those few still alive who remember the heyday of zealous young poets in pre-war SA wanting to “move the world” (or Adelaide at least!) recall volatile meetings. These were “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...”

So intense were some of these young firebrands that if not thrown out of one establishment or another, they were thrown in the Torrens for daring to voice what the patriotic diehards regarded as seditious statements about the progress of the Second World War. One of these was Max Harris, frequently at the centre of controversy. Colin Thiele also recalls the day that Harris accepted a dare to squirm his way, on his stomach, across the floor of the Barr Smith Library at this university. Of course, with the passing of time, many of these yarns may well be apocryphal.

What was the background to these fervent young men and what they achieved despite such foolhardiness?

### **SETTING THE SCENE**

#### **Colonial Literature**

Miss I.M. Foster, who made a lifetime study of early Australian literature, claimed that in the pre-1900 era, South Australia made “a bloodless contribution to Australian literature, completely and innocuously genteel, quite sporadic and never at any time really alive, as literature was alive in the Eastern States...”

She conceded that SA had some fictional writers who would be remembered, including Catherine Helen Spence, whose novel *Clara Morrison* (1854) is regarded as one of the best of early all-Australian novels. Spence was the colonial equivalent of a women’s libber, an activist before her time. There was also C.M. Martin, writing under the name of Mrs Alec McLeod, whose 1892 book *An Australian Girl* is referred to still in university courses on colonial literature as a fair example of Anglo-Australian writing of the time.

Some of you may have read *Paving the Way* by Simpson Newland, with its references to the author’s experiences in SA and giving a colonial perspective on stock Australiana: bushfires, floods, rural life.

In factual writing – travel, exploration, memoir – SA had plenty to offer, like the journals of Charles Sturt, Edward John Eyre, and John McDouall Stuart amongst the explorers. I’ll use just one travel example: the diaries of that colonial globetrotter Lady Jane Franklin who engaged a small schooner, the *Abeona*, to bring her party from Tasmania to SA in late 1840. A paper devoted to her reminiscences of Adelaide and country SA would be most interesting in itself. On Christmas Day she sailed up

the Port River to dine with Governor Gawler, a disastrous meal where “his servants set bad wine before his guests and will not bring him what he sends for; nor content with this pour gravy on his vice-regal head and whiskers and collar, and throw down masses of cream before him in the centre of the table...”

### **Reasons for Isolation**

SA was isolated not only by “the tyranny of distance” from the Sydney and Melbourne communities. While SA seemingly had everything in its favour, a paradise colony for gentleman farmers and no felons, it was this last factor that set it too far apart. In the times of convicts and transported men, who had to battle for life and liberty, SA was marginalised by not experiencing to any significant extent the added contamination of bushrangers, striking shearers, squatters and the land question, the gold rush and the Eureka stockade. Each of these gave life and blood subject matter to the eastern writers – Lawson, Patterson, Gilmore and many others. While we may argue that the myth and legend stuff was questionable fare, a definite Australian history and literature was based on these shared experiences from which SA was largely excluded.

### **End of the War and the Depression**

A greater impact was made after the First World War, in factual writing, with the work of writers like Dr Archibald Grenfell Price (*Founders and Pioneers of SA* and *The Foundation and Settlement of SA*) and explorer Sir Douglas Mawson telling his Antarctic adventures in *The Home of the Blizzard*.

Poets emerged like the classicist CR Jury. A South Australian, Leon Gellert, made the most recognised Australia-wide statement as a war poet with *Songs of a Campaign*. CJ Dennis, Australia’s “laureate of the larrikin”, the poet who moved versifying from the parlour to the pub, left Adelaide in 1906 but his name is associated with his SA hometown where a festival in his name is held regularly. Likewise, the lyricist John Shaw Neilson left SA at the age of 9. You may be asking what about Adam Lindsay Gordon who arrived in SA in the early 1850s? Quite a character, the exiled Gordon was reputed to have proposed to his wife along these lines: “Well girl I like your ways. You seem industrious and sensible. If you like we shall get married next week and you shall keep home for me.” She was 18 at the time! The couple ended up in Ballarat in the late 1860s.

Then, in the 1930s, SA emerged more prominently in literary endeavours. It is fair to say, I think, that the University of Adelaide at that time with a long list of highly respected staff did much to foster the new verve of the literary minded. Among these were Charles Jury and J.I.M. Stewart, professor of English at here between 1935 & 1945. In his memoir, *Myself and Michael Innes*, Stewart said: “Adelaide, including its university, had much to offer. Academically we were a relatively small concern...and I was without colleagues affording me any stimulus in my own field. But quite as important as his colleagues to a university teacher are his pupils and in this regard I’d been well provided for. I was never without first-class young minds around me...”

## **THIRTIES AND FORTIES: FERMENT**

## **Innovators and Founders**

### **Rex Ingamells**

Born in Orroroo in 1913, the son of a Methodist minister, he was a normal lad addicted to “bird-nesting, playing truant and raiding orchards”. He became addicted to poetry after listening to his English teacher at Port Lincoln High School reading “The Forsaken Merman”! After a Central Australian holiday in the summer of 1930-31, Ingamells became interested in the Aborigines and native legends, influenced no doubt by his friendship with TG Strehlow.

He founded the Jindyworobak movement on the premise that Australia needed to separate itself from alien influences – to be no longer Eurocentric or Anglophobic and embrace its own cultural heritage. Ingamells took to the bush in all university vacations (he graduated in Arts at this university in 1934) and explored the state, worked on a schooner in SA gulfs and went walkabout in the Centre, even watched corroborees on the shores of the Arafura Sea.

His first book of poetry, *Gumtops*, was published in 1935. I thought you’d like to know that the first section is called “The Land of the Crow”! In fact one poem is “Excited Crows”! Small and insignificant now in the big picture, it heralded the start of a movement in Adelaide, which had its origins in this university and which established a very definite group identity. While Ingamells and the Jindyworobaks were ridiculed as “the boy scout school of poetry” and other less than complimentary statements were made about them, and while Ingamells himself was undoubtedly fanatical about his cause – some would say xenophobic - the groundwork to present day South Australian literary structure was made by the group. The movement was a meeting ground for discussion. Two of Ingamells’ contributions were important for younger readers: the novel *Aranda Boy* and the school anthology he edited, *New Song in an Old Land*, a title that summed up his philosophies.

### **Flexmore Hudson**

Ingamells had known Hudson at the U of Adelaide as early as 1931. He was an early conscript to Ingamells’ cause; however, he soon tired of the narrow vision of the Jindyworobaks. He moved away from Adelaide as a country schoolteacher and when he returned, he distanced himself from Ingamells. He has several books of poetry to his credit; each one is evidence of his love for the Australian countryside.

### **Max Harris**

In a review of Australian literature written in 1960, Colin Thiele and Ian Mudie referred to Harris as “the stormy petrel”. Harris first appeared on the scene when Ingamells was putting together the first Jindyworobak Anthology in 1938. Harris was still at school but Ingamells recognised the talent and personality that would see Harris identify with the literary groups forming at that time and then form his own.

### **Ian Mudie**

He was also attracted to the Jindyworobaks, probably because he was a strident

champion of “the good old days” of pioneer Australia. He was a prolific poet and wrote several histories, of which *Riverboats* and *The Heroic Journey of John McDouall Stuart* are best known.

## ANTHOLOGIES

These men brought together their work and that of many aspiring writers by publishing volumes of verse. Well-known names in Aust Lit were published in these, including Judith Wright and Bruce Dawe.

**The Jindyworobak Anthology** (1938 – 1953) “gave hope to would-be poets in all states” according to Ingamells and gave notice of the groundswell occurring in SA at that time. I date the vigour of the group movement from the publication of the 1<sup>st</sup> anthology for it drew attention to what was happening in Adelaide.

**Poetry** (1941- 1947) was edited by Hudson; a statement not so much in opposition to Ingamells as an alternative outlet for poets who might not fit the Jindy mould. Harris also reviewed contemporary books of poetry.

**Angry Penguins** (1940-46) was a self-consciously modernist magazine edited by Harris who moved away completely from the Jindys; by the 4<sup>th</sup> issue he wrote: “We disapprove of all Jindyworobaks. May they all go to Alcheringa!” The most controversial issue was of course in Autumn 1944: the Ern Malley Hoax by which poets antagonistic to Harris plotted to prove what they saw as the falsity of his avant-garde pretensions. Harris took the bait beautifully, writing: “I am convinced that this unknown poet Ern Malley, mechanic and insurance peddler, is one of the most outstanding poets that we have produced...”

## MEETING PLACES

**University Colleges** St Mark’s College was one of the favourite places where one of the group, the poet Paul Pfeiffer, was resident. John Miles in his book *Lost Angry Penguins* says that St Mark’s “was to be the hub for the literary and internationalist debate that was filling the university at that time.

**City Rooms** Harris and Ingamells were among those who “took” inner city rooms: Thiele recalled Cavendish Chambers and the Verco Buildings. Pfeiffer later took rooms in Frome House.

**Bookshops** Preece’s Bookshop in the city was a favourite spot. Many of the small books that appeared in the late 1930s and early 1940s were Preece publications – Edgar and John Preece encouraged the young writers and Ingamells said that Mr Preece was “my continual confidant and advisor in Jindyworobak matters.”

**Homes** Jury, for instance, conducted regular readings in his Adelaide and later, North Adelaide homes. I think he too was resident in Frome House at some stage.

## ASSOCIATES

Other names well known to you, like Nancy Cato and Irene Gough, became part of

the group scene in Adelaide and contributed to the anthologies. Dutton, associate of Harris, emerged as a war poet. His story can be read in full in his autobiography.

## CHANGE AND CHALLENGE

- 1 **Second World War** The fervent young men were drawn closer together as war threatened their futures and challenged their idealism. Some of them enlisted and some were killed. The war became a sombre theme in their writing: Thiele for example, wrote 2 books of poetry about the war. Mudie edited *Poets at War* in 1944.
  
- 2 **Radio** After the war most of the young men and women took up or resumed civilian occupations. Few contemplated full-time writing as an option. They continued to write and publish; radio became an outlet for some of them, like Thiele, who wrote a great deal for ABC radio, especially radio drama. As older (more mature) writers they needed to find other ways to identify as a group.
  
- 3 **Fellowship of Australian Writers** an active group was established in 1956, meeting in members' homes and playing a lead role in the about-to-be-created Adelaide Festival of Arts.
  
- 4 **Writers' Week** The FAW saw its opportunity to have a part of the cultural arena opening at the Festival. Their poetry could become public and they could extend their group to accommodate interstate and later international writers. The nucleus of fervent young poets confronted by war and huge socio-economic changes after the war managed to create a coherent group which has continued in one form or another to the present day in SA. They published prolifically; eg Thiele and Mudie collaborated on *Australian Poets Speak*.
  
- 5 **Friendly Street**, for example, a long running community reading event, has grown out of the poets' need to meet one another and provides a place to read and hear new work. The first reading took place in Gordon Choon's Fireworks factory on the well-known date of 11 November 1975. It is a community which "welcomes survivors from earlier groups" according to the editors of the poetry book, *The Orange Tree*, a 1986 anthology which brought together the names mentioned here and many more in the state's literary history.

I don't think there ever will be an end to this literary life while groups continue to congregate in the interests of literature. It is appropriate for us to reflect on those graduates of the 1930s and early 1940s from this university whose enthusiasm drew them together as a group. They gave SA literature "a lusty vigorous life of its own" to quote a 1960s article about the movement. The lives of the young poets crossed for many years. Those who survived the war were influential in and beyond Adelaide. Those who did not survive would always be remembered in the context of a time when, to use a favourite Thiele quote from Wordsworth, "Bliss was it in that dawn be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!"

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