

Modern Australian poetry

Modern Australian poetry seeks to tell Australian stories and truths with a poetic significance, so that, 'they sear into the soul and can never be untold' (Dorothy Porter). The aim for clarity is central. Following early intense debate about the meaning of modern poetry for Australia – its essence, innovation and international context – today, it is seen as cosmopolitan as well as laconic but still lucid.

The richness, strength and vitality of Australian poetry is marked by its prodigious diversity. Yet themes persist through this diversity. An abiding interest is the Australian landscape and how to relate to it – its presence and its visual power. Significantly, a great deal of modern Australian poetry has been innovative and experimental, whether consciously or not. The search for modernism itself had an urgency in its explorations. (John Kinsella).

During the 1930s and 1940s there was much debate about modernist poetry and what it meant. In the 1930s, in Adelaide, two poetry movements emerged: the Jindyworobaks and the Angry Penguins.

The Jindyworobaks encouraged Australian writers to express themselves in language indicating their essence as Australians. On the other hand, the Angry Penguins wanted Australian poetry to become more innovative and international by using surrealism.



John Tranter with his Manchester Terrier 'Tiger', Sydney 2007. Image by and courtesy of Susan Gordon-Brown.



Max Harris, poet and owner in Mary Martin's bookshop, image by Samela Harris. Courtesy of AdelaideNow

The influence of the two movements on modern Australian poets and poetry was profound. In combination with the search for essentially Australian qualities, modernism has contributed to the unique character of Australian poetry. National, urban and social issues have been explored with great lucidity using realist as well as surrealist traditions.

Judith Wright believed out of all our poets, A D Hope has thought most about the task of poetry. In his poem *Australia*, the country may be 'the Arabian desert of the human mind', he wrote, but he hoped that 'still from the deserts the prophets come'. And so he turns 'gladly home' ... [to]...

*a landscape lost in its thoughts, as I in mine.
Places and names that echo and remain,
Khancohan, Kosciusko, Tom Groggin, Jindabyne,*

concluding this poem, *Beyond Khancohan*, with this telling quatrain:

*Man is made by all that has made the history of man,
But here the Monaro claims me; I recognise
Beyond Khancohan the place where a mind began
Able to offer itself to the galaxies.*

Ralph Elliott, Hope, Alec Derwent (A. D.) (1907–2000), Obituaries
Australia

When once asked what poets do for Australia, Hope replied that 'They justify its existence'. (Kevin Hart).

It can be argued that the debate that began in Adelaide over modern Australian poetry helped define modern Australian literary publishing, raised the standard of literary discussion in Australia, supported the wide spread expansion of quality book shops for the next half a century as well as lead the first studies in Australian literature. These studies were first taught at Adelaide and then the Canberra University College, later the Australian National University with A D Hope appointed to lecture.

'Relaxed cosmopolitanism' is a term that can be used of current Australian poetry. Today the standpoints of poets can range from the internationalist to the romantic, or just as likely be surrealist, and/or confessional.

The form of modern Australian poetry ranges from sonnets and centos through free verse and prose poems to the highly successful verse novel. Today, there is also performance poetry and poetry slams. Influences come from the



Dorothy Porter, author of nine collections of poetry and five verse novels, no source

street-wise and the high-brow. From their earlier minor role, female poets have ascended to an equal or leading role. (John Tranter, In praise of poets with PhDs in *The Australian*, 22 October 2011)

The Jindyworobaks



Rex Ingamells, image by Hammer and Company. Courtesy of SLSA B 6795

In the 1930s a group of poets led by Rex Ingamells called themselves the Jindyworobaks. Ingamells had written two volumes of verse, *Gumtops* (Adelaide, 1935) and *Forgotten People* (Adelaide, 1936) before he published *Conditional Culture* (Adelaide, 1938) as a manifesto.

The Jindyworobaks wanted to develop a distinctive Australian poetry which described the unique Australian landscape, such as the bush and the desert, in Australian terms which incorporated and appropriated elements of Aboriginal culture and the Aboriginal relationship to the landscape and natural environment.

Ingamells set out three conditions: '1. A clear recognition of environmental values, 2. The debunking of much nonsense and 3. An understanding of Australia's history and

traditions: primeval, colonial and modern'. (Jindyworobak – Towards an Australian Culture)

The Jindyworobak movement continued the spirit of literary nationalism inherited from the early Australian poetry, especially the 1890s. The Jindyworobaks described European culture as a 'conditional culture'. The Jindyworobaks maintained that in the oldest of continents, European culture could only be localised with an acceptance of 'place', and then renewed on a higher plane.

Ian Mudie, a founding member of the Jindyworobaks, published a selection of poems *Unabated Spring* in 1942. The Arrente word 'Alcheringa' (spirit of the place) is used more than once amongst his poems.

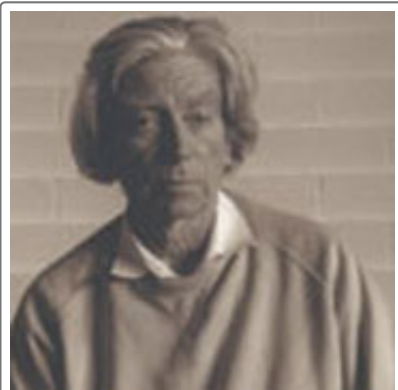


Roland Robinson's, 'Legend and Dreaming (1952), cover

[Ingamells] as an editor and publisher, through his Jindyworobak movement ... was responsible for at least forty-four volumes of poetry and literary comment ... between 1938 and 1953.

John Dally, Ingamells, Reginald Charles (Rex) (1913–1955), Australian Dictionary of Biography).

It had been argued that the Jindyworobak literary legacy also influenced Australian music because of its advocacy to find a way to create a unique identity by incorporating Australian landscape and environment in the music of Australian composers. (D J Symons, *The Jindyworobak connection in Australian music, c.1940-1960*, 2002)



Roland Robinson, c. 1991, photograph: gelatin silver, sepia toned by John Meredith (1920 – 2001). Image courtesy of NLA: an12653534-v.

Roland Robinson, the storyteller: poetry, dance and film

Another Jindyworobak poet, Roland Robinson (1912–1992) published *Beyond the Grass-tree Spears: Verse* (1944) and *Language of the Sand: Poems* (1949). In *Legend and Dreaming* (1952) and *Black-feller, White-feller* (1958), he used words and symbols from Aboriginal culture as well as transcribing Dreaming stories.

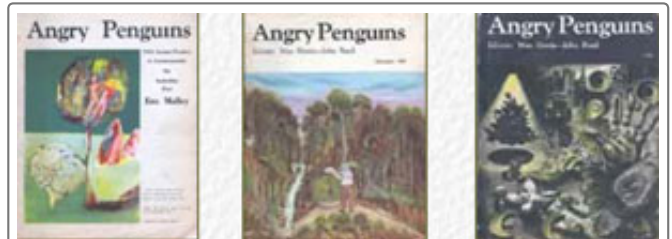
As well as a writer and poet, Robinson was a dance critic in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1940s he took classes with Helene Kirsova and appeared in a number of productions by the Kirsova Ballet. In 1954 Robinson was a scriptwriter with fellow poet Douglas Stewart and directors John and Janet Heyer on *Back of Beyond*, one of Australia's most successful documentaries.

The Angry Penguins, modern poetry and the Ern Malley hoax

A literary journal called Angry Penguins

During the 1930s and 1940s, a group of young Adelaide poets including Max Harris, Geoffrey Dutton, Sam Kerr and Paul Pfeiffer, founded a literary journal called *Angry Penguins*. The first issue of *Angry Penguins* in 1943 was a literary anthology devoted to modernist writings and published writers from overseas including Dylan Thomas,

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and James Dickey. American poet Harry Roskolenko wrote for *Angry Penguins* and was guest editor for one issue. In this, the *Angry Penguins* challenged orthodox views of what constituted poetry and literature.



Covers of *Angry Penguin*: Autumn 1944 promoting Ern Malley, December 1944, and 1945, source Max Harris estate.

Angry Penguin modernism: poetry linking art and jazz

After the first issue of the *Angry Penguins*, the Melbourne lawyer John Reed visited the group of young poets in Adelaide. Through Reed, Harris met the artist Sidney Nolan, as well as Albert Tucker, later regarded as part of a group of modernist 'Angry Penguin' painters.

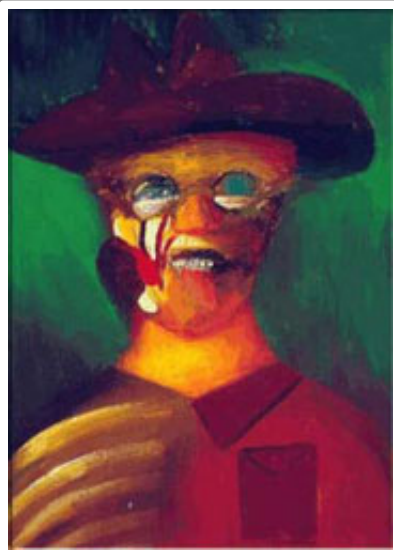
The link stimulated Harris to marry the two modernist movements, art and literature, and the second issue of Angry Penguins featured reproductions of a surrealist painting by James Gleeson and a Klee-like work by Sidney Nolan along with writings poetic, philosophical and ideological. Artist and critic Ivor Francis and jazzman/artist/poet Dave Dallwitz were among the contributors.

Samela Harris, *Angry Penguins*, Ern Malley website.

Reed thereafter joined Harris as editor of the *Angry Penguins*. Harris saw in Modernist approaches to writing and poetry the possibility for experimentation, for abstraction and impressionism - an anti-realist approach to poetry. Subsequently, Harris perceived Jindyworobak notions as parochial and limiting and this created resentment in the literary establishment.

The Ern Malley hoax

As a hoax, A D Hope and two other poets, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, sent in a raft of poetry by a fictional poet to gain Max Harris' opinion. Not only did Harris like the poetry but so did Reed, Nolan and other members of the *Angry Penguins*. However, the publication of fictional poet Ern Malley's poems by Harris in *Angry Penguins*, and Harris's endorsement of them, was THE great hoax of Australian literary history. Harris was not in on the hoax and experienced an extraordinary level of ridicule for his defence of Malley's work as modern poetry despite any literary merit it may have had.



Sidney Nolan,, portrait of [the fictitious] Ern Malley. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of South Australia

Literary legacy

Max Harris went on to work with Mary Martin, the business manager, to establish Mary Martin Books as well as other publications: the *Australian Book Review* and the literary magazine *Australian Letters*. Max Harris also played a central role in establishing Penguin and Sun Books paperback imprints in Australia.

Today, ironically, the legacy of Ern Malley and his enduring verse lives on through a range of specifically created works around the theme of the artist as hoax. This includes paintings by Sidney Nolan, Gary Shead's Archibald prize-winning painting, a literary publication *The Group* established by Larry Buttrose, a Griffith Review homage publication of six poems by John Stephenson and an Ern Malley exhibition at Heide in 2009. Peter Carey fictionalised

the Ern Malley affair and explored the theme in his novel *My Life as a Fake*.

Post-war giants – A D Hope and Judith Wright

A D Hope

A D Hope (1907 – 2000) born in Cooma, NSW was seen as one of the great love poets of the century.

Love often seemed to him a religious mystery, sex its sacrament. He produced haunting lines like 'You near me, you always, you watchful and invisible one'.

Tribute to A.D. Hope by Mark O'Connor

Alec Hope also explored the pull of religious faith and spirituality, conceding that his strongest statements were better left as questions:

*Do other beings inhabit our biosphere
Whose life is one and whole? I cannot tell.
I only know at moments everywhere
I sense their presences in earth and air...*

From *The Wild Bees*

Hope was instrumental in launching the first full university course in Australian literature.

Judith Wright

Judith Wright's poem *Oppositions* from her last collection of poetry *Phantom Dwelling* illustrates the immediacy of her work which struck chords with her readers. It is as if 'the lightning so lightly mentioned in the poem has jumped the page and made some of the ground under me smoke'. The poem is



Portrait of Judith Wright, 1998, photograph by and image courtesy of Terry Milligan and the National Library of Australia: an13997783.

lucid - marvellously lucid. Both rich and clear. And indeed beautiful - with a crystalline and precise earthing in the tubby body of the frog.

2001 Judith Wright Lecture by Dorothy Porter

Judith Wright was the first white Australian poet to publicly name and explore the experiences of its Indigenous people in her poem *Nigger's Leap*, published in her first collection *The Moving Image* (1946).

Like other great political poets, like Dante, like Anna Akhmatova, Wright's poetry tells, and tells lucidly, stories and truths that only poetry can really tell so they sear into the soul and can never be untold'.

Dorothy Porter

As a critic, Wright published *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965) with the intention of promoting the re-reading of such early Australian poets as Charles Harpur, Adam Lindsay Gordon, and Henry Kendall. Wright also supported Oodgeroo in getting her poetry published. Wright received several awards, including the Grace

Leven Prize (1950), the Australia-Britannica Award (1964), the Robert Frost Memorial Award (1977), the Australian World Prize (1984), and the Queen's Medal for Poetry (1992).



Kenneth Slessor (1901-1971), poet and official correspondent. Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial

Slessor in Sydney – solemnity and satire in the 1950s and 1960s

In the 1950s and 1960s, distinct poetic strains developed in Sydney and in Melbourne.

In Sydney, where Kenneth Slessor, R D Fitzgerald and Douglas Stewart were influential, a more relaxed, popular, and various style of poetry flourished. Kenneth Slessor was:

probably the most talented one to have written in Australia, and the first renovator of twentieth-century Australian poetry. Slessor's career as a poet ran in tandem with his life as a hard-working journalist. He seems to have been able to turn off the raucous babble of everyday Sydney, like a radio, and to produce the piercing, rinsed-clean order of words that characterises his best poetry. Philip Mead (ed.), *Kenneth Slessor: Critical Readings*, UQP, 1997.

Rosemary Dobson

In Sydney, Rosemary Dobson's first book of poems was *In a Convex Mirror* (1944), and her second was *Ship of Ice* (1948). Her work is often reflective and pictorial, and many of her poems are based upon paintings, particularly from the Renaissance. Her writing spans 75 years if we include a volume, *Poems*, published when she was a schoolgirl at Frensham. Her writing evolved from a formal approach to accommodate free verse, an example of which is the *The Greek Vase*. (Rosemary Dobson: Collected, review by Martin Duwell, 1 June 2012)



Rosemary Dobson. Courtesy of National Library of Australia

In the introduction to her 2012 volume *Rosemary Dobson: Collected*, David McCooey describes her as a poet of light and lucidity whose poems are also haunted by 'visitations, apparitions, omens, annunciations, prophecies and premonitions'. In 1979 she was awarded the Fellowship of Australian Writers Award (then known as the Robert Frost Award).

Gwen Harwood

Gwen Harwood (1920–1995) was born in Brisbane, and moved to Tasmania when she married in 1945, where she raised four children. Her first book was *Poems* (1963), and she published six more books of verse. She was awarded the Robert Frost Poetry Award (1977) and the Patrick White Award (1978). Her fourth book *Bone Scan* (1989) won the Victorian Premier's Literary Prize for poetry.

Gwen Harwood's poetry is widely recognised now for its stark intimacy and brilliant resonance. It is about human totality, wide knowledge and raw experience in all its vibrant paradoxical qualities; ideas and craft, creativity beyond gender, and yet gendered 'woman' when required at crucial existential moments.

Colleen Keane, Gwen Harwood, Selected Poems, in Sydney Morning Herald, 11 February, 2013

Poetry as intense, biting and literary realism, 1960s–1970s

Francis Webb (1925–1973), from Sydney, produced intense, demanding poems exploring religious experience and the nature of creativity.

Melbourne verse

Melbourne verse expressed a solemn, ironic, concern for social and moral issues and, in the work of Vincent Buckley and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, an academic literariness.

In Melbourne, Bruce Dawe wrote biting and often funny social and political satires as well as reflecting the realist tradition – showing strong social awareness, with religious overtones. His first book of poems was *No Fixed Address* (1962), a title reminiscent of his own early years. He went on to publish many poetry titles and win many awards including the Dame Mary Gilmore Medal in 1973 and the Patrick White Award in 1980.

Sandgroppers and Islanders – Dorothy Hewett, Jack Davis and Oodgeroo



Jack Davis. Photograph courtesy of University of Queensland Press.

Jack Davis (1917-2000), of the Nyoongah people, spent his childhood in the Western Australian mill town of Yarloop and began writing when he was 14 years old. He worked as a stockman in the north before returning to Perth and settling into fulltime writing. He worked as a stockman in the north and later, in Perth, became a fulltime writer of poetry, plays and memoirs as well as an actor and Indigenous rights activist.

His first book was *The First Born* (1970), a volume of poetry. *Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia* (1978) and *John Pat and Other Poems* (1988) followed. His poetry expresses 'a yearning for a past connectedness with the land' and is inherently political. Jack Davis received numerous distinctions including

the British Empire Medal, the Order of Australia, and honorary doctorates from the universities of Murdoch and Western Australia.

Dorothy Hewett

Dorothy Hewett (1923-2002) was raised on her parent's isolated wheat farm in Western Australia. By the time she was 20 she was a prize-winning playwright and poet and had joined the Communist Party. She attended university, travelled to Melbourne and Sydney, worked in factories, left the Communist Party in 1968, and moved permanently to Sydney in 1974. Her personal life was as turbulent as her politics: she had three husbands and six children.

Hewett wrote dozens of successful plays, books of poems, novels, and memoirs. Among her published works are *Hidden Journey* (1967), *Rapunzal in Suburbia* (1975), *Alice in Wormland* (1987) and *Greenhouse* (1979). Hewett's works combine romanticism with irony.

Dorothy Hewett's *Greenhouse* (1980) has love and betrayal, death, travel, politics and passion as its subjects although the main source of energy in this book is sexual. (John Tranter reviews)



Dorothy Hewett, portrait courtesy of University of Western Australia

Oodgeroo (Kath Walker)

Oodgeroo (1920-1995), of the tribe Noonuccal, was born Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska, on Minjerribah (the Stradbroke Islands), was a domestic servant at the age of 13, and served in the Australian Women's Army Service from 1942 to 1944.

Her first book of poetry was *We Are Going* (1964), the first book of published poetry by an Aboriginal Australian and it was reprinted seven times in as many months. Oodgeroo published seven books of poetry in all and was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Mary Gilmore Medal (1970), the Jessie Litchfield Award (1975), and the Fellowship of Australian Writers Award.

Intense and demanding poetic searches, 1980s–1990s

Prominent poets from this period include Davis Campbell, John Blight, Bruce Beaver, Les A Murray, David Malouf, John Tranter and Robert Gray.

John Tranter describes the focus of this period. The mood is one 'of passive recollection' which tells of an adult life tormented by decay, women gained and lost and dead animals. Adamson

does not ruminate on history, philosophy or nature, unless it is to search for a mask that he can use to dramatise his life ... he sketches his environment as a backdrop against which he can act out a ritualised search for experience made meaningful in poetic terms.

John Tranter, review of Robert Adamson's *Where I Come From* (1980).

The poetry of snakes and making sense, 1990s



Fay Zwicky

Fay Zwicky (b. 1933) began publishing poetry and short stories as an undergraduate at Melbourne University. She was a concert pianist before becoming a Senior Lecturer in English literature at the University of Western Australia. One of her most-admired poems, *Kaddish*, is an elegy for her father that also draws on her experience of growing up in Melbourne's

Fay Zwicky. Image courtesy of University of Queensland Press.

Jewish community. Another poem, *No Return*, deals with the paradoxes of loyalties to grandparents and parents – those 'once-/huge troubling presences'.

Fay Zwicky was the winner of the 1982 NSW Premier's Literary Awards for poetry, for *Kaddish and Other Poems* (UQP, 1982), and the 1991 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards, Poetry Award, for *Ask Me* (1990). In 1993 she published the collection *Fay Zwicky: Poems 1970-1992* (1993). She won the Patrick White Award in 2005.

Roberta (Bobbi) Sykes

Roberta (Bobbi) Sykes (b. 1943) was born and grew up in Townsville. Formally educated to the age of 14, she then completed a Masters degree and then her doctorate in education at Harvard University. While studying, she won the Patricia Weickert Black Writers Award (Australia 1982). In 1994 she won the Australian Human Rights Medal. Her publications include her earlier poetry book *Love Poems and Other Revolutionary Actions* (1988), which has been translated and published in Germany and the three-volume autobiography *Snake Dreaming* (1997–2000).

Billy Marshall-Stoneking

Billy Marshall-Stoneking (b. 1947) is an Australian/American poet/playwright and author of seven books, including *Singing the Snake: Poems from the Western Desert*. In 1988, he was awarded the prestigious Bill Harney Prize for Poetry.

Verse novels

Dorothy Porter

Dorothy Porter (1954–2008) is credited with causing Australian poetry's comeback in the late 1990s by re-visiting one of the oldest forms of literature – the verse narrative. Porter's style is described as:

brash and confronting ... nudging its way onto general best-seller lists and threatening to shatter a stereotype modern poets are all too familiar with.

Australian poetry makes a comeback, ABC 7.30 Report transcript

Porter was the author of nine collections of poetry and five verse novels, including *Akhenaten*, *The Monkey's Mask*, *What a Piece of Work* and *El Dorado*.